THE CARRINGTONS OF HIGH HILL

BY MARION HARLAND

THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

39
1

THE CARRINGTONS OF HIGH HILL

THE CARRINGTONS OF HIGH HILL

AN OLD VIRGINIA CHRONICLE

BY

MARION HARLAND

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1919

COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published August 1919

PS
3007
C235

TO

CHARLES SCRIBNER

FOR FORTY YEARS MY PUBLISHER AND FRIEND
THIS LEAF FROM THE STORIED PAST
IS GRATEFULLY AND AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

1512954

The Carringtons of High Hill

CHAPTER I

"Long, long ago—years upon years—when I was young and giddy, one of my dearest delights was to picture to myself what I should like to be and to do if the management of my life were committed to me. I have been giving the question half-an-hour's hard thinking this morning. Real thinking —not castle-building with glorified wood, hay, and stubble, but logical deductions and all that, you know, as serious as anything I ever learned in 'Watts On the Mind.' And I have come to a sane and settled conclusion."

The pause that followed the speech was half a minute long before the solitary auditor said:

"And that was——"

"That *is*, my dear aunt! The present tense—*if* you please! I feel sublimely certain that

"'Were the whole realm of Nature mine,'

at this blessed minute, I should rather be just what I am and here, and now, than to be Semiramis, Cleopatra, and 'the fair girl Victoria' (as the newspapers call her) rolled into one miracle of loveliness and cleverness and authority."

Sinking the defiant tone into gentler musing she went on, her eyes fixed upon the scene without the window at which she sat:

"Yes! Helen Carrington! eighteen years old, just emancipated from the thraldom of a young ladies' seminary, once more in the home in which she was born, healthy and strong, and happy in having the dearest aunt and father, and the wisest grandmother living, and with years of fun and frolic before her—sitting in this grand old chamber, gazing out upon 'the goodliest land the sun ever shone upon.' That was what Captain John Smith said of Virginia, and he left the truth nine-tenths untold.

"'Oh, let us be joyful! joyful! joyful!'"

She warbled it, whirling around the room with uplifted arms as a humming-bird might encircle a rose-bush, winding up the waltz by skating down the whole length of the polished floor to the side of the still figure in a rocking-chair set within the deep embrasure of another window. Falling upon her knees, the girl took the smiling face between her hands and kissed it passionately.

"Say you are as glad to have me at home as I am to be here! Or I shall expire upon the spot!"

"Nobody could be happier than I to have my little girl with me again! You do not need to have me repeat it."

The elder woman drew the flushed face to her shoulder and laid her own cheek against it.

"We understand each other and love each other too well to waste words and time in protestations."

Her voice was singularly musical, her hands wandered fondly over the child's hair with meaning in each motion.

Helen had called her companion "aunt," and had known no other title for her from earliest infancy. In reality, the bond of kinship was so slender that it would not have been recognized anywhere except in old Virginia. Elizabeth Moore was the only child of a distant cousin and intimate friend of the mistress of the homestead, to which the child came at six years of age, thirty years ago. Madam Carrington—as she was even then called—had brought her up with her own daughter, who died young. Elizabeth recollected no other home, and very faintly the mother whose failing health had barred the child from close association with her for a couple of years before the parent's death.

No advantage that wealth and social position could procure was denied the adopted daughter, and she was an heiress in her own right. In person she was attractive to other eyes than those of her adopted family. Petite in figure, graceful in motion, with regular and refined features, and gifted with a gentle fascination of manner and speech, she was the acknowledged favorite of county society. If lovers had not thronged in troops to High Hill—the ancestral home of the Carringtons—enough suitors were reported to keep the gossips on the alert to discover valid reasons why Elizabeth Moore

had not married. She did not vex her placid spirit with the problem and the perplexities it cost her well-wishers. At thirty-six she held on the gentle tenor of her blameless way, the friend of all, the safe counsellor of the young, and the abiding comfort of the ruler of the demesne.

While she was still a mere infant it was decreed that "Elizabeth" was, as Madam Carrington's husband, then alive, declared, "too stately a name for the midget." It was he who rechristened her "Beth." A winsome title, and according so harmoniously with the wearer that it was fixed upon her for life. True, Madam Carrington never favored the abbreviation of the name bestowed upon her friend's offspring by parents and church. Upon her firm lips the child and woman was always "Elizabeth." The servants, as a matter of course, never ventured to use the pet-name. Etiquette, rooted and grounded in immemorial custom, forbade them to take liberties with the titles of young masters and mistresses. Even to the colored foster-mother, her nurslings were "Master" Richard, William, or Edgar, and "Miss" Margaret, or Adelaide, or Victoria.

Presently, Helen slid—girl fashion—to the floor and laid her pretty head upon the lap of her friend. Beth put out an arm for a cushion that lay in the window-seat.

"Sit upon this, dear! The floor is cold and hard and, maybe, dusty. And your frock is too pretty to be spoiled."

"You think of everybody's comfort except your own!" pouted the petted beauty. "Tell me, auntie dear, was your angelic self-forgetfulness born in you, or did you have to learn it by what our moral philosophy teacher used to call 'The Discipline of Life'? And a mighty uncomfortable process *I* should consider it!"

"Sometimes—yes! It all depends upon how we take it. You were praising Jacob last night for breaking in your blooded mare so well. You would not have cared to ride her as she was a year ago."

"But we are not brute beasts! That is, all of us are not. You, for instance, are nearer akin to the angels," her arm stealing around Beth's slender waist, to deal an emphatic squeeze. "And if, as grandmother and the preachers say, our lives are all cut and fitted and basted for us before we are born—where is the need of interfering with the plans of the Almighty?"

"I don't know, my child!"

The calm accent would have been dry upon another's tongue. Helen twisted herself around for a full view of the other's face.

"Does *anybody* know? You are a truth-teller, and don't hesitate to say right out that you are as ignorant as if the Bible had never been translated into King James's Version, and never a sermon upon effectual calling and predestination had been preached. Oh! I am sick and tired of it all! I have my own life to live and my own career to make, and I am a free agent—not a jumping-jack, jerked

by a string held by somebody I have never seen, and who has a million billions of other puppets to pull! Grandmother would send me off to bed for a week, and feed me upon bread and water until I 'professed conversion,' if she were to hear me. You were made on a different pattern. I can be blasphemous to you when the spirit moves me."

A soft hand was laid upon her lips. But the gentle voice did not vary by a half-tone:

"You are mixing your figures! You were telling us at breakfast of attending Quaker meetings in Philadelphia, and ought to know that the spirit does not move anybody to blasphemy. It is not wise—it certainly is not safe—for two people as ignorant about such matters as you and I, to discuss creeds and doctrines. I have never known any good to come of such talks, even among men and women who profess to be learned in theology."

Helen's mute kiss upon the small hand before she let it go, was the only response.

In the Southern homestead of the forties, the "chamber" still held the place of honor awarded it by colonial freeholders. Since the eyes of the mistress must be ever on the watch to see that rules were not defied, and daily and hourly orders were obeyed at least, in part, the chamber—named as though there were no other in the mansion—was invariably upon the first, or what the original English settlers would have called "the ground floor." The waste of time and strength involved in climbing stairs to carry on the surveillance of the dwelling,

garden and kitchen, requisite to secure a tolerable degree of comfort for the household, would have worn the delicately reared matron of the age into an untimely grave. The chamber occupied by Madam Carrington had descended to her by ordinary generation, her great-grandmother and her husband's great-grandfather having been sister and brother. Four generations of the women of her blood had been born, had lived out useful, domestic lives, given birth to large families of children, and died in their beds in the big room in which the first scene of this chronicle is laid. The chamber was twenty-five feet square, and flanked the front door on the right as one mounted the steps of the long, deep porch, which nobody thought of calling "veranda" or "portico." There were four big windows in the room, two overlooking the front yard. The word "lawn" crept into the Virginia vocabulary a generation thereafter. The other two were on either side of the wide "chimneypiece" opposite the door leading into the entrance-hall. The high mantel was of carved oak and framed a huge fireplace.

The season was mid-May, the air was balmy and the sky without a cloud, yet the andirons—brass sphinxes brought from "the old country" a century and-a-half ago—were laden with hickory logs, all of equal size and form, underlaid by yellow "lightwood" kindlings, ready to flash into a roaring flame at the touch of match or "chunk of fire." Without having heard of hygienic precautions, and not knowing "sanitation" by name, the mistress of the

chamber claimed that the uniform health of her family was due in no small degree to her practice of having a blaze upon the hearth every morning of the year until the Fourth of July, and after that, whenever damp or cool mornings warranted it.

The "blaze" had done its duty that day, and been supplanted by the orderly construction that now graced the hearth.

At the corner of the room most remote from the fireplace stood the curtained four-poster. The ample feather-bed was like a smooth snow-drift under a counterpane embroidered by the present owner and her three sisters, in as many different designs, all original with the respective needlewomen.

Full white dimity curtains, depending from a carved cornice, enclosed the bed on three sides, and were looped back with blue ribbons on the side facing the room. A mahogany bureau of the late Georgian period; a wardrobe of the same date whose double doors were mirrors ten feet in height; three armchairs; a "light stand" bearing two silver candlesticks at the head of the bed; two folding card-tables, genuine Sheratons; three small Windsor chairs and the low rocker in which Beth sat with her work-basket, completed the furniture of the spacious room which was the heart of the home.

Madam Carrington had told, times without number, that the card-tables were bought by her grandfather at the auction of the effects of one of the Williamsburg Custises, a cousin of Martha Wash-

ington's first husband, and how the baize covering of the folding-leaf of one table bore the marks of a toddy-bowl and smaller rings left by tumblers of "hot stuff."

"My grandmother had new baize put on, of course," she would add, "but the old covers were never thrown away. I have them still. For, my grandfather, who fought under Washington and had messed with him very often, used to say: 'There is no telling but that one or more of the stains may have been made by the general's own toddy tumbler.' The dear old gentleman was too good a Presbyterian to care for cards or toddy for himself, but like all true patriots, he reverenced Washington."

Beth could repeat the tale, word for word. Once in a great while when madam was safely out of hearing, she would confide to a discreet kinswoman —or man—the commentary of the veteran's grandson, the late Edmund Carrington, that "if one might judge from the rubicund complexion and bulbous nose of the sainted Presbyterian's portrait, hanging over the sideboard in the dining-room, he was not converted to teetotalism until his wild oats were sowed, cut, and harvested."

It is doubtful if the irreverent remark was ever made by the husband in the august presence of his consort. If it had drifted to her at second hand, she made no sign. She relegated it, along with other signs of the growing irreverence of the present age, to the limbo appointed for "things not convenient to be spoken of."

In Beth Moore's constant heart her adoptive father held a higher place than that accorded by his relict to the Father of his Country. His genial courtesy to all classes; his tender care of her—from the day he lifted her in strong, caressing arms from the carriage that brought the orphan to his door, to the hour when he opened his dying eyes upon her grief-stricken face, and the stiffening lips tried to frame her name—he was the embodiment of her ideal of manly virtues and graces. He had been friend, champion, teacher, and fondest of parents to her for six years. She had passed her twelfth birthday just a week before he died. She had taken her last ride with him that day—the first ride upon the horse he had had trained for her, "to be given to her when she entered her teens." She had carried the phrase in her memory as a sacred bequest.

She could not have told why she was saying it over to herself, or why his image should have been especially distinct in her mind on this May day. Nor why the child, leaning on her lap, her dreamful eyes bent upon the cumulous clouds asleep in the blue sky above the tree-tops, should at that instant have put a leading question to her:

"Aunt Beth! What sort of a man was my grandfather?"

CHAPTER II

THE thrill that went through her companion's frame brought Helen's eyes from cloudland to the present scene.

There was nothing in the commonplace query to startle or surprise the little lady. Grandfather had been dead these twenty-odd years, and Beth was really not related to him. The thought flashed through her brain before the answer came, uttered deliberately and with no token of emotion:

"One of the best men God ever made, my child, or that He will ever make. Why do you ask?"

Helen laughed gleefully:

"Because I heard Mr. Robinson say a funny thing about him the day I spent with Carrie Robinson in Richmond. He was talking with another man on the back porch, and they did not know I could hear what was said. The other man—a Mr. Selden from down the river, who had dined with the Robinsons that day—said: 'I met Paul Carrington on the street this morning. He told me that he was on his way home from Philadelphia, where he had been to bring his daughter from boarding-school. He looks well—and like his mother. She was the handsomest woman in the county when Edmund Carrington courted her.' Then he laughed

—a horrid kind of chuckle—and said: 'You recollect that we used to speak of them as "Mrs. Carrington, Et Cetera"? His name was "Edmund Travers Carrington," you know. But I tell you, she was a "clipper!"' Then Mr. Robinson said something in a low voice and they moved away. I suppose he may have told who I was, and was afraid that I might be near enough to overhear them."

"It would have been better if you had not stayed there after your father's name was mentioned. The only honorable and safe thing to do in such circumstances is to get out of hearing as soon as possible. The old saying that 'Listeners never hear any good of themselves' is true in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases. I am very, very sorry you heard the disrespectful remark about your grandfather. Forget it as soon as you can! I know Mr. Selden. I thought he was a gentleman!"

"He is, auntie! The Robinsons think the world and all of him! He was only joking, and he did not know I heard him!"

"Don't try to defend an unkind and unjust speech —a foolish play upon the accidental arrangement of initials! I have heard of it before, but never imagined that a man of Mr. Selden's character would mention it. Listen, child! never give the silly joke a second thought.

"Your grandfather was a Christian gentleman, with the kindest heart that ever beat. He was so far superior to some men with whom he was obliged to associate that they did not understand him. He

loved books, and they loved horse-racing. He was chivalrous to women, and they were careless of the common civilities of life. But I have not patience to talk of it. It was *monstrous!* disgraceful!"

To Helen's distress and amazement the words were lost in a sob, and the speaker raised the handkerchief she was hemstitching to dry a tear. The display of weakness in serene, even-pulsed Aunt Beth was unprecedented in the girl's experience. Both arms went around the bowed form, and a flood of regretful apologies—half-articulated in her haste and contrition—were poured into Beth's ear.

The outbreak was quickly over. The unfinished cambric was used to dry the apologist's face, and Beth smiled naturally into the moist eyes.

"I ought not to be sorry that you told me the ridiculous story, for it gave me the chance to set wrong right. I don't want you to be afraid to ask me any questions that bother you, and which I may be able to answer. It is far better to get rid of perplexities by plain speaking than to let them fester in the heart until they change to poison. Open confession is good for the soul, we are told."

Helen was perched upon the window-bench, now, and her smile was fading before a blending of wistfulness and diffidence it was not easy to put into words. She twisted her fingers tightly while she murmured slowly: "That is a Roman Catholic proverb, isn't it?"

"Perhaps so. It is true, no matter who said it!"

"That reminds me—" began the girl, an odd mix-

ture of wistfulness and incertitude gaining upon her as she tortured the slim hands.

"Of what else?" smiled Beth, resuming her stitching to grant the girl time to collect her wits and put words in order.

"I ought not to say 'reminds me,' for the idea has not been out of my thoughts for one waking hour since I came home. I can't tell you how I have longed to ask you a few questions, and how I, somehow, couldn't bring myself to speak of what has never been talked of when I was by. Yet it would seem that I, of all living creatures, ought to know all about it. I seem to have had the luck of hearing—*things!* when I was in Richmond. I met at the same Robinson dinner an old lady—a Mrs. Poitiaux—who said I looked like my mother!"

She stopped short and looked straight into eyes that widened suddenly, as in alarm, or in amazement. Then Beth threaded a needle with hands that did not quiver, and spoke calmly:

"Yes? Go on!"

"You won't be vexed if I do?"

"Why should I? Didn't I tell you to speak out frankly?"

"I know, but you see, I have never heard her spoken of by any of you at home. I thought when I was younger that was because we Virginians don't talk about dead relations. It isn't considered proper—for some reason I don't comprehend. And it is not so, everywhere. In Philadelphia, for instance, it is quite different——"

She was feeling her way from one sentence to another, still searching the eyes that did not quail under the questioning that was a demand.

"So it never struck me as singular that I grew up without being told anything of the mother who died when I was a baby. Once a colored nurse took me down to the burying-ground at the foot of the garden, and showed me a hollow she said was my mother's grave! Ugh! my flesh creeps now when I think what a forlorn spot it was! The Germans call a graveyard 'God's acre.' The High Hill burial-ground must be the devil's playground —overgrown with grass and weeds for three-quarters of the year! Three times, between March and November, the tangled stuff is cut and carried away to make bedding for cows and horses. I coaxed the girl to take me there once a week, and to help me trim the grass from my mother's grave. Then, somehow, grandmother found us out and punished Molly, and changed my nurse. I was told there were *snakes* there!" She shuddered again.

"Dear child!" Beth chafed with her warm hands the fingers that were growing cold. "You were an imaginative baby, and it was unwholesome for your mind, as well as for your body, for you to visit that place often. You know that we do not think of those who are gone from us as lying in the earth, but as living and happy. This is why so little attention is paid to graveyards."

An impatient gesture checked her.

"We won't discuss that now! What I began to

say was that this Mrs. Poitiaux is a Catholic. She had met my mother several times when my father took her to Richmond, spring and fall, to buy new clothes, and—as Mrs. Poitiaux told me in a half-whisper, lest Mrs. Robinson should guess what we were talking about—'to get a chance to go to her own church and to confession.' She cautioned me to say nothing to the Robinsons about it when she found that I had not known until then that my mother was not a Presbyterian, or even a Protestant. *Now*—that the black secret is out of my mouth—I want you to tell me all about my very own mother. Was there any other disgraceful secret connected with her? If so, I have a right to know it. When I turn over the question in my mind—particularly at night when I ought to be sleeping—I cannot believe that I am the same girl who declared not half an hour ago that she was the happiest being alive. You often say that I am 'mercurial' and have the 'sunniest temperament of anybody you have ever known.' But I can, and I do *suffer* when I let myself *think*, and I have done some hard thinking this last week.

"*Now*—before grandmother and father come back from making the rounds of the plantation—which will take them for an hour more—I beg you—the only mother I have ever known—to tell me who and what I am, and who was my *real* mother."

She was actually kneeling, her hands clasped; her gaze into Beth's eyes was an agony of supplication.

Without offering to raise her from the floor, the

older woman laid aside her work and put her hand under the quivering chin of the suppliant.

"'Disgrace' is not a word to be named in this matter, my dear. I will clear away every shred of the 'mystery' in a very few words. Your mother, Cécile Larue, was a New Orleans beauty and belle when your father, who was making a tour of the South, fell in love with her, and after a month's acquaintance married her and brought her to his home. Your grandmother was not pleased, at first, because the marriage was brought about so suddenly. Your father had written to inform her of it, and to prepare her for their coming. But, as happened more frequently then than now, the letter miscarried, and we did not get it until he had been at home a week.

"By then, the bride had taken all hearts captive. She introduced new life into the quiet neighborhood, and the young people blessed her for it. She was full of life and gayety. In a year you were born, and the old house was happier than ever. But the climate was never quite suited to your mother's constitution. She took cold easily and grew listless and nervous. Your father went with her to the White Sulphur when you were two years old, and she rallied for a while. The next winter she was thin and pale, and had a cough that alarmed us. In January your father took her back to New Orleans. It was a tedious journey, but he wrote that she bore it well, and that he would leave her with her married brother for the rest of the winter. He came

home alone in March. In May he had word that your mother was ill again, and set out at once for New Orleans. We heard nothing for several weeks. Then a letter came to say that she was dead, and that her husband was bringing the remains home. He reached High Hill the last of June. The next day she was buried in the family graveyard.

"You know the rest; how you have been the dearest thing upon earth to us three ever since. How, when your father and grandmother thought it best to give you better educational advantages than were to be had in Virginia, they entered you in a Philadelphia seminary, the principal of which was a distant relative and old friend of your grandmother.

"And now"—gathering the trembling figure into her bosom as if she were still the baby that had slept there until the little one developed into the maiden who had outgrown her protector—"now that you have heard the long, sad story, we will talk of other things to get these worrying fancies out of your head. Let them go, my child! There is enough real misery in the world without torturing ourselves with ghosts of our own making. Did Mr. Rice tell you that the white Dorking hen, sent to him from England, has hatched out a fine brood of chickens? You knew—didn't you—that he built a separate house for her when she was ready to bring up a family?"

The little jest fell flat. The ghosts were far from being laid. Helen had braced herself in the em-

brasure of the window, her arms wrapped about her knees. She looked away from the would-be comforter, in putting the next question. Her eyes were set and hard, her intonations inquisitorial.

"I am not to be put off in that fashion, Aunt Beth! As I have said, I have a right to know all I wish to learn about my personal history, and I mean to get the facts in the case. Did my father love my mother? Was he unkind to her?"

"*Helen Carrington!*"

The exclamation rang out like the snap of a whip, but the stiff attitude was not relaxed; the eyes stared unwaveringly at the opposite side of the recess.

"Yes! it *is* Helen Carrington who is bold enough to demand her rights. You promised to be frank with me. Keep your word!"

Angry as she was, she was forced to respect the dignity of the reply.

"It is not strange that I should be shocked by the question. You ought to know your father too well to think—much less to insinuate—that he could be unkind to any one. He loved your mother *devotedly!* He has mourned her sincerely all these years. Let that satisfy your curiosity. I thought everybody who had any knowledge of his character and actions must be aware of that. You should be the last person on earth to doubt the long, sad story. I take it you have no more to say on the subject?"

She arose as if to leave the room. For her the inquisition was closed.

Still without looking at her, Helen held the skirt of Beth's dress fast.

"There are one or two more points to be settled. Did my grandmother *hate* her son's wife because he married her without her permission? Or because she was a Roman Catholic?"

"If you do not know her well enough to answer the questions for yourself, it is useless for me to tell you the truth."

Never in the whole course of their united lives had Helen seen Beth wrought up to positive anger. The soft rose-tint that kept her face young took on a deeper flush; her tone was vibrant. Gathering up her work into the basket, she walked to the door, features set and head erect.

In the sudden revulsion of a nature at once mercurial and passionate, Helen sprang after her, overtaking her in the wide porch which was the family sitting-room from April until November. It was dim with the green glooms of honeysuckle and "virgin's-bower," and besides themselves there was no one in sight. With loving vehemence the penitent dragged her mentor to the far end of the retreat and forced her into the big rocker which was Madam Carrington's usual seat. Holding her there, the girl poured out a torrent of contrition.

Some devil must have taken possession of her to-day! She hated herself for yielding to it! She could never forgive herself! But if Aunt Beth could and would—she would promise never, *never*, NEVER——

She was not allowed to go further.

"There! there!" The tone was the same that had hushed her childish rages. "We will go up to my room and quiet down before any one comes in to see us. A little cold water and cologne will set you all right again! No, my child! I am not angry with you—only sorry that we forgot ourselves for a few minutes."

"Forgot ourselves!" That was the tone of the woman's life and conduct.

Before Helen was sent to the Philadelphia seminary to "mellow down," as she put it, she had declared that "Aunt Beth insisted upon sharing the sins of other folks, and gave them all the credit of their virtues."

Refusing now to listen to more confessions, and turning a deaf ear to incoherent petitions, she forced the culprit to lie down upon the lounge in the cool, shaded upper chamber, of which it might truly be said that "the name was 'Peace,'" administered a draught of sal volatile and water, and fanned her patient until the convulsive heavings of the recumbent form subsided into natural breathing.

"Asleep—poor baby!" whispered the watcher, drawing a tall-backed chair between the lounge and the window to shut out every ray of light. For herself, she sat in the shadow, motionless and thoughtful, reviewing the stormy scene she would fain have averted. She had a sensitive conscience, and to tamper with the truth was a sin at that tribunal. She dealt honestly with the part she had

played in fulfilling the pledge to be candid with the daughter who had been kept all her life in ignorance of the leading facts of her parents' wedded life.

"Every word was true," was the ruling. "Had I told her all, nothing but trouble would have come of it."

Then memory, cruel as the grave, bowed head and heart. The June day she had named to Helen as the date of the home-bringing of the Southern bride was years ago. Yet in fancy she was sitting upon the shady side of the porch with Paul's mother and Mr. Rice, then the pastor of the church in which the Carringtons worshipped—chatting naturally of indifferent affairs. The forenoon was windless but not sultry, and the roses were in richest bloom. Madam Carrington wore white habitually in summer, as did Beth, and Mr. Rice had on that day a suit of immaculate white linen.

Beth had picked a tea-rose for him, and he had fastened it nattily in his buttonhole. The front gate was not visible from this side of the porch, and they were too busy talking to hear the roll of a carriage that halted there. The crunch of footsteps upon the gravel walk skirting the corner of the house attracted no attention until they halted at the foot of the steps, and Paul Carrington led to the level of the porch floor the radiant creature none of the three had ever seen before. Draperies of filmy pink and gray floated about her like twilight mists, her beautiful face dimpled with smiles.

As Paul began to speak she held out two white-gloved hands in wooing appeal:

"Mother! This is my wife! You must love her!"

Then—Beth could never forget the crowning horror of the scene—Madam Carrington swooned for the first time in her life. Her son, from one side, and Mr. Rice, from the other, saved her from falling, and laid her back in the chair from which she had sprung erect like one shot through the heart. . . .

Beth pressed her hands upon her eyes—as if to shut out the weeks and months that followed. She had forced herself to outline the tale to the child of the enchantress who changed the whole complexion of county life for the next three years. Beth had told Helen that the bride captivated the neighborhood. The particulars of the conquest she would not detail.

The chain of fine plantations bordering the river on both sides had a reputation throughout the State for intelligence, breeding, and a refinement of prosperity utterly dissimilar to the meretricious polish which is all that mere wealth can impart. Without exception the "best people" of the region were old families bound into the charmed confederation by generations of college-bred freeholders and high-born women. Their lands were well-cultivated; their negroes well-treated and contented; their churches were well-attended. Nine-tenths of the white population were Presbyterians with a

sprinkling of Episcopalians. The latter might be said to add frosting to the seemly loaf of highly respectable Christianity. Heredity might be characterized as the understudy of an approving Providence that had shaped the ends of county families, preserved accredited pedigrees and assured incomes.

Paul Carrington's beautiful wife had French blood in her veins. She was a mad lover of pleasure, of power, and of prestige. In the three years of her reign as a society leader in the neighborhood we have indicated in a few, feeble strokes, she wrought cyclonic changes. In place of staidly elegant "dining-days," she set the fashion of dinner-parties and suppers, the last followed by dancing kept up into the small hours.

She was a clever musician, and she introduced ballads that "took" like wild-fire with the young of both sexes, and horrified their elders. Making no secret of her own ecclesiastical affiliations, she yet gave conspicuous proof of wifely duty and the desire to pay due respect to her mother-in-law and her congeners, by attending their church with conscientious regularity. While there she comported herself with devout decorum that aroused in the elder women presumptuous hopes that she might in time be led to see the error of her ways—for which, misguided dear! she was less to blame than the parents who had brought her up in the worship of the Scarlet Woman. It would have been amazing to one unversed in the subtleties of social diplomacy to note how surely the imported leader conquered

the prejudices of all classes and ages. Fascination was, with her, a genius. Madam Carrington's oldest and warmest friends whispered among themselves that Madam "did not make allowance for Paul's wife, and that it was a pity she took no pains to conceal her disapproval of her works and ways." Policy and Christian charity (alas, too often divorced!), if not her love for the handsome son who had always proved himself loving and dutiful —even if he had fallen in love with a Papist—should have dictated moderate measures.

Cécile Carrington was on the topmost crest of popular favor when the birth of her child secluded her for a while from the stage she had not merely adorned, but had built, and "set." The baby was not a week old when the first open break in the armed neutrality of mother-in-law and the young wife occurred. Cécile had never before exhibited the obstinacy which is the underpinning—sometimes unsuspected—of what we applaud as "will-power." Before her confinement she had selected a healthy young mulatto whose child was a few days older than Cécile's own, as the prospective foster-mother of the expected infant. She took the mulatto into confidence, and possibly her adoring Paul, with regard to her intention, but no one else, prior to the great event. The trial safely past, she made no secret of her design. She could not and she would not nurse her child! Her health and her inclinations, her duty to her husband and to society, forbade it.

Could Beth ever forget the altercation that ensued upon Madam Carrington's discovery of the plot menacing the physical and moral being of her first grandchild? She had seldom, if ever, been vituperative with her idolized son, but she brought all the powers of denunciation to bear upon his mind and affections in the final battle of right against wrong. When he steadfastly supported his wife's views and resolution, she shut herself up in her room for three days, and would admit no visitor except her adopted daughter.

In the revery that bound her thoughts to the rack of memory, Beth writhed and moaned feebly.

To no mortal confidante could she ever speak of the varied tortures of those days. When the mother finally yielded to the inevitable and resumed her position as nominal head of the home—in face and carriage she bore the signs of struggle and defeat. The baby was consigned to the care of the wet-nurse, and the vanquished grandparent made no sign of repugnance to what she had told Beth, over and over, was "a burning disgrace to the family—an outrage to decency that was never allowed by any of the connection, unless in the event of the mother's death. And that," she broke out bitterly during one repetition of the protest, "might be the best thing that could happen in this case!"

The awful admission had never been repeated by the solitary auditor. She put it away now as too terrible to be recalled.

Baby Helen was six months old when the Virginia

climate began to tell adversely upon Cécile. She pined in the monotony of a rural community in which the diversions she had introduced now palled upon her. She had travelled on both sides of the ocean, and change was a prime necessity of her being.

Paul's acquiescence in her every caprice may have become irksome slavery by the time he had accompanied her to watering-place and seashore, season after season, and spent much of his substance in riotous specialists' bills. No intimation of this in word, look, or gesture corroborated the suspicions which former comrades dared whisper among themselves. When Cécile made known to him her conviction that she was in a decline, and that nothing could save her life except a long sojourn in her beloved old home, he bowed to the mandate with grace that never forsook him. Less than half a dozen sentences of the recital to Helen carried the pitiful story to a conclusion.

Against her will, the woman who had filled what should have been the mother's place to the deserted infant, saw, as if it had happened but yesterday, the open grave under the weeping willow, the heaps of sodden earth defining the awesome oblong, and beyond the red-brown ridges a group of men and women, collected hastily to assist in the last rites. There was a short committal prayer after the leaden coffin was lowered to its resting-place, then slow spadefuls of redder clay filled in the pit.

And all this time the white drawn face of the

chief mourner (she had nearly said "the only mourner") haunted her like a spectre of his once blithe and buoyant self. She had cried out to God that night upon her knees beside his baby's crib, that the punishment for a single false step was too great. She repeated the passionate protest now mentally.

From that crucial period to this, Paul Carrington had played the man in every relation of life. How gallantly she could have told more eloquently than any other witness of his demeanor and work. Surely, if there were mercy in heaven and justice upon earth, he must some day see of the travail of his heroic soul and be consoled, if not "satisfied."

God grant that the child who grew to look more like her mother every day—avid of personal enjoyment, brilliant in speech as in face—might not inaugurate a second era of self-immolation for the two who loved her best!

CHAPTER III

"THE rounds of the plantation," upon which Helen had said her father and grandmother were bent, was a triweekly function all summer long. For shrewd and cogent reasons, it was performed with systematic irregularity as regarded the days of the week. If the tour of inspection were to be confidently anticipated on Monday, everything would be in apple-pie order on that day, whatever might be the aspect of field, barn, and woodland for the five "workadays" succeeding it. If the apparition of the "no-top" buggy and the sleek chestnut roadster driven by "Marse Paul," accompanied by the "mistis," haunted the gangs of field-hands on Tuesday of this week, again on Saturday, next week on Wednesday and Friday, it was beyond the power of mortal calculations to forecast future visitations.

"Ung' Cyrus," the headman for a score of years, and noted as "mighty preverlent in pra'r," found a Scripture parallel in the situation which he improved to edification at a cabin-meeting when madcap Helen had stolen to the back window with a couple of girls as bent upon fun, and heard it all:

"When de Marster of us all, white and black, bon' an' free, visits His plantation which is de worl' —He comes same like de marster an' mistis of High

Hill keeps an eye 'pon we-all, thar servants. He don' soun' a trumpet before Him"—suiting the action to the word by bringing his hollowed hands together and "tooting" through them. "He comes when He listeth—that means when He chooses, and when He thinks we need Him mos', whether we know it or not. An' what I been said one hundred times, to you young folks what ain't got settled to your work, I say to you all in dis here room, dis blessed arternoon—WATCH!"

The exhortation may have had something to do with the established fact that the High Hill plantation had maintained for a half-century the reputation for skilful farming and profitable results that kept it in the vanguard of agricultural enterprise in a State renowned for producing the finest tobacco and wheat sent to the Southern market. It is certain that the model plantation was a monumental tribute to the talent and energy of the woman who had held the reins of government since her husband's decease. It was what might be called—figuratively—an open secret that hers was the ruling spirit and guiding hand before the event that removed Edmund Travers Carrington, Esquire, from the scene of earthly action. The *sobriquet* embodying his initials, which had kindled Beth to generous indignation, was fastened upon him by disrespectful wits early in his wedded life.

The tour of inspection of this particular forenoon had been longer than usual. It was eleven o'clock when the topless buggy was driven into the stable-

yard by a groom, and Madam Carrington was escorted by her son around to the side-porch where Beth and Helen were sitting, work-baskets in lap. Her half-hour nap had made the volatile sprite over as good as new. Eyes and lips laughed together as she jumped up to draw an armchair forward for her grandmother, and untied the strings of the big "calash" of drawn gray silk the wearer refused to discard in favor of the lighter sunbonnets affected by her acquaintances throughout the region.

"You have stayed out so long that you are tired and hot—my! how hot!" scolded the granddaughter with the insolence of youth. "Sit right down here! out of the draft! You might catch your death of cold! You must cool off a little before you have your snack! It has been ready this great while."

"Only five minutes by the hall-clock, my dear!" admonished Beth's gentlest tone. "Here comes Tom with the rest of it."

The colored footman set down his tray upon a round table and shifted it to a spot directly in front of his mistress.

Breakfast was served at High Hill for eight months of the year at half past seven o'clock. The dinner-hour in the country was two, in town, three. The foodless stretch of the intervening hours was broken by a "snack," more or less abundant as suited the tastes of different families. Unless the day were very stormy, the refection at High Hill was partaken of in summer upon the side-porch. A door led directly into the dining-room, and the location

was convenient, besides being deliciously cool, and screened from showers and gusts by the thick network of vines.

"Afternoon-tea" would be unknown to American house-mothers for threescore years to come, or iced tea *à la Russe* would have usurped the place of the chilled raspberry shrub which was filming the outside of the tall silver pitcher. There was milk for Helen and iced water for everybody. A plate piled with "Mam' Tina's" incomparable "wafers" flanked the pitcher upon one side, and another of sponge-cake completed the intermediary repast.

The author of the epigrammatic definition of afternoon-tea—"A reflection upon luncheon and an insult to dinner"—had not been born. Madam Carrington would have set the seal of her august approval upon it.

"A snack," she was wont to say, "is not—strictly speaking—a meal. It is only a stay to the stomach which would, without it, become faint and incapable of digesting food properly." Therefore, she discountenanced the practice of certain less enlightened house-mothers of dulling appetite by hot breads and cold meats with marmalade and pickles and, in their season, melons and roasted green corn. The dignified *châtelaine* was marvellously wise for her generation in other matters than dietetics and fine cookery.

Now that her calash—very like a barouche-top in shape and not so far inferior in size as a twentieth-

century woman might imagine—was laid aside, one could easily credit the encomium passed upon her by the ancient admirer and overheard by her granddaughter. Her eyes were unfaded, her color was clear and healthy; her teeth were sound, and her skin—which tradition reported to have been a miracle of smoothness and bloom in her far-off youth—was unwrinkled, although lines about the mouth and eyes bore witness to sorrow and conflict. Her dark hair, heavily stippled with silver, was banded evenly beneath the fluted border of a cap not unlike the "mob" at which we smile in seeing it in old portraits and engravings. It was of the finest lace and became her rarely. Every other elderly gentlewoman in the county hid her hair, or the loss of it, under a false front which merited the name so shamelessly that the obviousness of the "deception" was extenuation. Madam Carrington defied convention and "wore her own hair." She clung faithfully to the immemorial custom of the Southern widow of never doffing her "black" except when she alternated it with white, accentuated by black "love" ribbons. A rosette of the same nestled in the frills that were pronounced above the "part" in the banded hair, and the strings of crépy ribbon, the name of which suggested bereavement and constant remembrance, were knotted under the slightly doubled chin. Her gown was of cambric with never a crease in the skirt to betray the excursion of the forenoon. She neither panted nor mumbled in her talk.

Before she tasted the shrub poured out for her by her son, she turned to Beth:

"Have you seen Mr. Rice since we went out? He ought to have something to eat. I fancied that his appetite was not quite up to the mark at breakfast."

Beth touched a hand-bell left by the footman within her reach. And to Tom, when he appeared, she said: "Find Mr. Rice and tell him we should be glad to have him take a glass of something cool with us. It is getting very hot. And say that your mistress and Master Paul have come in."

In five minutes footsteps on the walk announced the coming of a little gentleman, who removed his broad-brimmed straw hat from a bald head in mounting the steps. Evidently a gentleman, yet his garb hardly warranted the presumption. Coat, waistcoat, and trousers were of unbleached muslin —yclept "cotton cloth," in Virginia—and fitted him as well as they might have fitted any other man of equal height. They were made—as were the clothes of all the negro "hands"—by a plantation seamstress, and betrayed the fact in every line. The coat bagged between the shoulders and sagged in the skirt; the trousers made a swishing noise at the knees as he walked.

Paul brought forward a chair, and Helen hastened to pour out a brimming glass of the ruby "shrub."

He looked warm and weary, but he thanked both of them before mopping his forehead and his shining pate with a damp silk handkerchief. His voice

was husky and weak, and he sipped the ice-cold beverage as a child might shiver away from a hot drink.

It is essential to explain here the position held by this man in the family of an erstwhile parishioner. The Presbyterian church of Mount Hor was his first and only charge. He had come to it as a licentiate, and been ordained to the Gospel ministry in the building which was demolished at a later date to make room for a larger "edifice" erected upon foundations laid a century before.

"When"—as Madam Carrington was wont to remark impressively—"masons were honest. Mount Hor is literally founded upon a rock, and the masonry within the excavation was as solid as the stone itself when it was uncovered. They don't do such work now!"

She was not the only one of the "older members" who worshipped the God of their fathers with more fervor of devotion for the knowledge that beneath beams and flooring was the ancient foundation—consecrated by ancestors who

> "Kept unstained what there they found,
> Freedom to worship God."

It was not to be marvelled at that the blend of Huguenot blood with a strong strain of Scotch-Irish should have held the church firm to the faith delivered to the fathers. Nor—as was piously believed and openly asserted by pastors and parish-

ioners—that an especial blessing abode with the flock that made the wilderness of the New World to blossom as the rose. It was a large and prosperous flock over which the Reverend Mahlon Rice was ordained to minister by East Manover Presbytery. He was twenty-four years old, and that was more than twenty years ago. He was unmarried, but his sister lived with him.

When the very slender bond of nominal union of the State with the Church of England parted naturally and quietly, The Glebe, erected a score of years earlier upon a small farm within a couple of miles of High Hill, passed into the hands of Paul Carrington the Third, and was by him made over formally as a parsonage to the church to which he belonged. With true Virginian aversion to unnecessary changes in established methods, the house and land were The Glebe long after tenants and neighbors had forgotten the origin of the name.

"The minister's" family had always been on intimate terms with the High Hill Carringtons. Next to her own home and kindred, the mistress of the stately house on the hill gave a place in her heart to her church. The highest Anglican could not have pronounced the word more reverently. She contributed liberally of her wealth for the support of its temporal interests. Yet more liberal and far more effective was the consecration of time and energy to the furtherance of the higher purposes and holy possibilities of the spiritual Zion of which the temporal was but a faint symbol and antepast.

Mahlon Rice and his sister Naomi were her guests for a month while The Glebe was undergoing repairs and alterations she deemed essential for the residence of the newcomers. It was she who secretly incited and engineered the movement on the part of house-mothers that stocked storeroom, smoke-house, and stables with provisions and industrial implements. She it was who confidentially "lent" two of her own trained servants, an able-bodied man and his wife, to the brother and sister, and gave a fine young horse for the use of the pastor in his rounds of the extensive area covered by the parish. All this was executed with delicacy and address that left the recipients but dimly aware of the extent of their obligations to the author of manifold benefits. It was not strange that, under auspices such as these, the incumbent of Mount Hor should be able to report truthfully, and with devout gratitude at spring and fall sessions of his presbytery, that the "work of the Lord was prospering in his hands." He had a genius for organization, and the Sunday-school and weekly-catechism class established by himself and carried forward zealously by devoted lieutenants, were a matter of State pride.

Each church organization was a close corporation, and this to an extent incomprehensible to the Christians in this day of personal service and extensions of every conceivable name and aim. Once a year, perhaps, a returned missionary occupied the Mount Hor pulpit and "presented his cause." Whether he were from the South Sea Islands or Lapland, he

was sure—knowing the reputation of the Mount Hor-ites—of a handsome collection at the conclusion of the service, and eager hospitality during the few days he could spare from his itinerary. In the third year of Mr. Rice's incumbency, Madam Carrington instigated and pushed on into fairly successful operation a Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society, which contributed regularly, and in no niggardly measure, boxes of clothing, religious reading, and toys for native children, to be duly forwarded to Greece or Liberia.

Thus ran on the shining current of home and church life—broken into, but not up, for a season by the brilliant episode of Cécile Carrington's career. Like the fall of a meteoric stone into a landlocked bay, the whole course of nature was changed for the time. The subsiding waves restored the dear familiar scene to placidity.

The nameless grave in the sequestered graveyard had been mounded by the snow-drifts of ten winters when gentle Naomi Rice, whom the ruling passion of her life—devotion to her only brother—alone redeemed from neutral-colored commonplaceness—sickened and died as quietly as she had lived. Close upon this followed the pastor's own illness. He had ridden on horseback ten miles through a furious storm to visit a sick parishioner, returning to his desolate home, wet to the skin and shivering in a violent chill. Word of his illness was carried to High Hill late that night. The next morning brought Madam Carrington's chariot to the door of

The Glebe. She alighted from it with her son, followed by her own maid, bearing a basket of "comforts" the lady foresaw would be needed in a bachelor establishment. A brief and thorough survey of prevailing conditions was terminated by a *coup d'état* that took by surprise even Beth, waiting anxiously at home for news of the expedition. The sick man was done up skilfully in blankets and borne to the carriage in the strong arms of Paul Carrington. The carriage-driver—who would be a "coachman" now—Madam, and her maid had already improvised a bed of pillows and boards in the vehicle. Paul, in one corner of the back seat, supported the unconscious man as he might a child during the slow drive to High Hill.

Meanwhile the Rices' servant had galloped ahead to prepare the household for the unexpected guest. Within an hour the family doctor was in attendance upon a delirious patient, installed in the best guest chamber of the mansion, and the entire corps of the plantation was at his service.

Before he was able to walk down stairs all his personal effects were transferred from The Glebe to what he was bidden to consider his home as long as he would make his hosts happy by remaining with them.

He was destined to have no other earthly habitation. When what the doctor diagnosed as "quinsy," yielded to remedial measures, and pitiable weakness more slowly to loving nursing and such generous diet as the best cook in the county served for him

under her mistress's supervision—it was apparent that permanent damage had been wrought upon a system never robust, albeit tenacious of vital forces.

What went by the name of "minister's sore throat" was then comparatively a new malady, but already enough was known of it to excite curiosity among the laity, and apprehension in clerical circles. Oddly enough, the victims, so far as heard from in central Virginia, were invariably Presbyterians and Episcopalians—a circumstance that created a lively sensation among Baptists and Methodists. For, be it known to modern readers, written sermons were discountenanced by these communions. That holy men of old spake as the Holy Ghost moved them was a warrant that had the force of an edict in the opinion of these successors of the apostles. Sermons should be thought out with prayer and wrestlings of spirit, in secret communion with the Master of souls. This done, He might be trusted to put, and to keep, the right words into His servants' mouths. The Presbyterian and Episcopal divine was, in common parlance, "liberally educated," and carried the training of college and theological seminary into the pulpit with him. This took the form of written notes, to be consulted at need or will, by the preacher of discourses written out in full from text to "Finally, brethren"—"delivered" with or without emphasis and discretion, as talent, or practice, or native aptitude for oratory, lent force and freedom of speech.

"Minister's sore throat"—ingenious opponents of pulpit-readings in contradistinction to extemporane-

ous speaking, contended—was due to the unnatural contraction of, and pressure upon the vocal organs by the lowered chin in the act of reading aloud from a MS. laid upon the desk or table, behind which the speaker stood. It should have been more prevalent with Episcopalians, who read the entire service, prayers and all. That statistics did not support this theory was readily explained by the patent fact that the sermon in a liturgical church was proverbially short, and subordinate in importance to readings from the prayer-book.

Mr. Rice's sermons were never long, but he wrote every line and conned each thoughtfully afterward. College professors and literary visitors to the neighborhood had been heard to say that every word might be printed as it fell from his lips, without correction from editor or proof-reader.

Sweeping hypotheses aside, it is enough for us to know that the new disease had the faithful shepherd of the Mount Hor flock by the throat in a grip that robbed him of profession and office, and, for long, of physical vigor. It was a voiceless spectre of his former erect and buoyant self who was tended by Madam and her aides, until, one bleak November day, he bade farewell to his motherly hostess and accompanied her son to Richmond *en route* for New York. Thence they were to sail for Nice with the anticipation of a winter in Italy.

In a life which was affluent in gracious benefits to his fellow-men, Paul Carrington was never more royally beneficent than in charging himself with

the task of bringing back health and hope to a wreck that contrasted pitifully with the superbly sane manhood of his guardian. The conception and execution of the scheme were Paul's own, although warmly approved and abetted by the mother, whose parting with him wrung her strong heart to breaking.

She said, and candidly, that she was repaid for all the separation had cost her when, in the flush and fragrance of mid-May, her "boy" brought home the whilom patient, so nearly well physically and so thoroughly himself in mind and mood, that the whole community held high jubilation for weeks together. "Nearly well physically," with one drawback, the growing perception of which subdued the general rejoicing into loving solicitude. The injury wrought upon the vocal organs by illness was beyond repair by medicines or climate. He would never be able to preach again. Resonance and power had departed forever from the voice that for strength and sweetness had had no equal in the bounds of presbytery or synod. Madam Carrington was measurably prepared for the truth by Paul's letters, and, as usually came to pass when mother and son took counsel together upon weighty issues, they had an expedient ready to meet the crisis.

"The Office," a detached building usually but a story in height, was so common an adjunct of the Virginia home, that the lack of it was exceptional. To this day it is a matter of conjecture for what purpose these buildings were erected, and why they

invariably bore the name of "office." Few of the early planters were doctors, or practising lawyers, although subsequently the latter profession became popular with younger sons and embryo politicians. One or two such instances in preceding generations may have fixed the title upon what was doubtless built as a school-room, with an upper story for the tutor's dormitory. The office at High Hill was a stone's throw from the dwelling, in a shaded corner of the yard, and fronted the plantation road leading from the nearest highway. Into this "office" had been packed Mr. Rice's furniture and books when The Glebe was vacated. Madam Carrington had the key during his absence abroad. The day succeeding his arrival she commissioned Paul to induct his friend into quarters prepared for his occupancy. "As long as you will make us happy by staying, dear old fellow," was the sequel to the invitation. "We will not give you up until you are tired of us. That is settled! Now, listen!"

In five minutes he had well nigh convinced the amazed hearer that affairs at High Hill could not be rightly administered without the co-operation of another white man. His mother, in particular, he urged, was no longer young, and she had leaned too long upon the judgment and intelligent sympathy of one whom she loved as a son, to be deprived of these now.

"But all this is a waste of words—" Paul wound up by saying. "Here you are, and here you will stay, please God, while we both live."

Visits of indefinite length were a feature in that age and region, which did much to earn for the State the reputation for abounding and gracious hospitality it enjoys to this day. As I write, there recurs to me an instance which was not accounted remarkable at the time, of an elderly distant cousin-in-law who prolonged a visit of a week into five years, making himself at home so agreeably and usefully that hosts and acquaintances ceased to think or to speak of him as a guest.

When, after waiting a decent time as behooved a bereaved congregation, Mount Hor made out a call to a younger man with aggressive tendencies, and what a brother clergyman dryly characterized as "a laudable degree of self-appreciation," Mr. Rice was referred to at the meeting of Presbytery called for the installation, as "our beloved brother whose faithful labors in this quarter of the vineyard will bear fruit for many years to come."

At the numerous feasts of welcome made in honor of the new shepherd, the former incumbent, with humility that had in it the elements of real dignity, took a lower seat, with no expectation of being bidden to go up higher.

In the High Hill family he was chaplain, adviser, comforter, and colleague in affairs, temporal, spiritual, and intellectual. He was scholarly in taste and habit, and ever ready to share gleanings of fact and riches of thought with his best-beloved friends. He laid out courses of reading for Beth, who was Helen's governess until the girl went to the Phila-

delphia seminary. The two preceptors fitted the child so well for the classes she entered there that her proficiency in more than one branch of education received honorable mention from principal and teachers.

Long before his sister's death left him alone in the world, Mahlon Rice had made choice of poultry-raising as a special study and active pursuit. At High Hill the fad bloomed into an avocation. Under his enlightened management, the chicken-houses and "runs" of the estate became famous all over the county. He wrote articles upon the poultry-yard which were published in *The Farmer's Register*—the one agricultural periodical of the South—and brought him letters of congratulation and inquiry from four different States. If he imagined, in the humility that never approximated its degenerate parasite, humiliation—that he occupied a mere niche in the household he served with heart and soul—he yet stood upon a right goodly pedestal.

CHAPTER IV

"I SHOULD—first of all—have apologized to you, Madam, and to the young ladies for appearing in your presence in this sorry garb," said the little minister, setting down the emptied glass with a comprehensive bow, addressed chiefly to Madam Carrington, then including the other two. "I was on my way to my room to make the needful changes when I received your tempting invitation, I was thirsty, the day is warm—and I knew what awaited me here!"

A second bow left no need of further speech. In attire, he might be the peasant. In deportment and speech he was a Chesterfield. Oliver Wendell Holmes characterized the school to which this man and his compeers belonged as "the Brahmin Caste." One of my girlish reminiscences is of one of the vast, informal guild who had taken the place of a missing ploughman when laborers were scarce and plantation work was pressing. The young fellow had driven a straight furrow all day, and was on his way home, bareheaded, and in his shirt-sleeves when he espied his sister and a schoolmate coming to meet him. Without seeming to see them, he slipped into a thicket to put on the coat thrown over his arm, and to wipe his face dry. The instinct

was inborn, and nourished by early training in the duty he owed to himself and to women.

Madam met the apology indulgently: "Don't trouble yourself to make explanations on this hot day. We all understand that broadcloth and fine linen would be out of place in the 'hennery.'"

Beth seconded her smilingly:

"I hope Mrs. Dorking and the baby Dorkings are doing well? When may we see them?"

"Thank you! They could hardly be doing better. I hope to show them to you in a couple of days. There are ten of them—animated puff-balls."

"Where *is* Dorking?" put in Helen. "And how do you know that the mother-hen really came from England? We hear of so many cheats and humbugs nowadays that we don't know what to believe."

"Dorking is a town in Surrey County, England. I believe that my Dame Partlet came from that place because the men who consigned her and her mate to me through a poultry dealer in New York are honest, and so is the American firm."

"The fowls may have been stolen on the way, and plain vulgar Yankee rooster and hen put in the coop. Stranger things have happened," persisted the spoiled child.

Mr. Rice's good humor was invincible: "They carry their credentials on their backs—in color, shape, comb—and in other particulars. I am tolerably familiar with the breed, and I am satisfied. If I were not—why—my dear young lady, we must take some things in this world upon faith."

Paul Carrington leaned against a pillar of the veranda behind his daughter, and bent to stroke the curly head.

"As you grow older, pet, you will find that you must believe in many more things than can be proved. That is one of the hardest lessons youth has to learn. I heard you say yesterday that you would not believe what you couldn't understand. That is the talk of infidels and fools—and of little girls who will be wiser when they know less."

The saucy face she lifted to him was so like her mother's at that moment that a pang wrung Beth's heart. Could he fail to notice it? Helen's wild talk and passionate questioning of the morning had unsealed gates of memory the confidante had not trusted herself to pass for long, long years. And just where Madam Carrington's chair was, now, she had sat on that day of the fateful home-coming! Beth stole an apprehensive look at the father's face. There was not a cloud to betray that he, too, was haunted. Cécile's name had not been uttered in her hearing since the dour funeral she had lived through again in fancy, three hours agone. She had no reason to think that the like reticence did not control the intercourse of mother and son. Had their dead past buried its dead clean out of the reach of memory and of regret? Why should she, alone of the trio, be visited by ghosts that would not down at the bidding of reason and pride?

The thread of musing was snapped by the mad rush around the corner of the house of a barefooted

boy in a smock of unbleached cotton cloth that waved like a pennon behind his naked brown legs. He brought up suddenly at the foot of the steps, and squealed his message between broken breaths:

"Please, mistis, mammy sont me to tell you dat Mr. Winston's buggy is comin' down de road!"

Mr. Rice was upon his feet in a second:

"You will excuse my hasty retreat, Madam? Clerical conventions must be observed!"

Without waiting for a reply, he vanished into the house, through the back door of which he could make good his retreat to the office.

A shout of laughter from Paul, echoed by the others he had left, followed him.

"Poor fellow!" gasped Beth, and Madam Carrington:

"But for the credit of the cloth I could wish that he had been discovered in his working-costume! Beth, daughter! ring for Tom to take the tray! Helen! tell Tina that Mr. Winston will be here to dinner. My son, you will see that somebody is ready to take his horse!"

She sat still in issuing the quiet commands, and did not raise her eyes from her knitting until Paul reappeared with the visitor.

The Reverend John Knox Winston was from "the Valley," a fair territory bounded and crossed by twin spurs of the mighty Appalachian Range, and destined to be known in post-Civil War history as "West Virginia." The liberal admixture of Scotch and Irish settlers in the original population

lent stability to their politics, and buckram to their orthodoxy. Some of the ablest divines in the Southern and Western churches, and erudite professors in college and seminary, were drawn from the mountain fastnesses among which, as residents gloried in relating, the Father of his country had declared his intention to make his last stand for liberty should the conflict go against the Continental forces.

John Knox Winston abated not one whit of his orthodoxy in pitching his tent in eastern Virginia. He had taken his academic degree in Hampden Sidney College, and studied divinity at Princeton Seminary. One course of study he called his "shield," the other his "buckler." Thus panoplied, he enlisted, with never a misgiving, in the war against the world, the flesh, and the devil, eager to battle with spiritual wickedness in high and in low places. In the sacred desk he was a Boanerges; out of it, genial and social, kind-hearted and ever ready to lend a word of advice or of encouragement. A powerful "revival" had starred the first year of his pastorate, and similar awakenings of interest in personal piety were not lacking at any subsequent period. Congregations were larger with each month, and the roll of church members had gratifying accessions.

"Success" was stamped all over the man who took the porch steps at two strides and gained the side of the hostess with two more. His resonant baritone rang down the length of the hall and reverberated from stair to stair.

"Suttinly, *is* a mighty man o' God!" murmured Mimy, Beth's maid, who hung over the balustrade of the second flight.

Hat in hand, he grasped Madam Carrington's slender fingers in his mighty fist, and, as is the manner of many more refined folk, when addressing the aged, articulated with precision and adapted the volume of sound to presumedly dull hearing.

"I hope I have the pleasure of seeing you quite well, my dear Madam? Not that I need inquire! You look to be in radiant health. Do not rise, I beg!" foiling her motion to gain her feet, by placing the disengaged hand upon her shoulder. "Miss Elizabeth! you are well I hope? Miss Helen! I am glad to see you at home again!"

Practice had made his rendition of the formula perfect. Conventional observations upon the weather and its beneficent effect upon growing crops, befitted the watchman upon the walls of a bucolic Zion. It was easy to draw Paul and Beth into the general conversation that followed. "ADAPTATION" is the keystone of the "method" prescribed by instructors in pastoral theology, and this post-graduate had mastered the Art. As Paul Carrington hearkened for the next half hour to the duet between his mother and her guest, varied by an occasional reference to himself and to Beth Moore, he found himself wondering if any other profession, unless it were politics, were better adapted to stultify personal independence of thought and action than that which he had been taught from his cradle

to reverence as the holiest to which man could dedicate his life and all his powers. The man before him spent at least one-third of his waking hours in "pastoral visitation." It was safe to compute that half of this time was devoted to church-members whose walk and conversation attested the power of practical piety upon their lives. Here and there might be found one weak in the faith delivered to the fathers, or a "reading man" with doubts as to the authenticity of the Pentateuch, or the miracle of Jonah's temporary residence in the finny monster of the deep. Or a girl had listened to a sermon upon immersion as the one and only means of salvation. All of them needed spiritual medicament. The neighborhood was healthy, and the bill of mortality commendably low. The shepherd's ministrations to the sick and afflicted of the flock were faithful, and brought in rich returns of love and gratitude. This was legitimate obedience to his "high calling." Could the same be said of the discussion of current events in county, state, and nation, politics taking the lead; of the comparison of opinions upon the relative merits of "Bleak House" and "Vanity Fair," both of which Beth had read aloud in the family last winter? Sensible—and in the main bright society talk, all of it—but was it worth the expenditure of a third of the mortal existence of one who had given long years of toil to the acquisition of that which would fit him to declare the whole counsel of God to a perishing world?

Upon the pretext of overlooking the men who

were trimming shrubbery upon the lawn, Paul got up presently, walked to the far end of the porch, and leaned over the railing, out of hearing of the animated colloquy.

The day was unseasonably warm for May, but a cool breath from the river stole to him across the distant low grounds visible from his lookout. Aromatic whiffs from the cut shrubs blended with the fragrance of rose and honeysuckle. Beyond, the gardens, fields, green with lush grain, stretched to the horizon of native forest. Ah! it was a fair domain, this! deeded by royal grant to his forefathers, and held intact down to the present day by gentlemen without fear and without reproach! And there was to be no son of his to carry the line down to ensuing generations! His teeth were locked savagely, and the knuckles whitened in the hands clenched upon the rail. It was not the first time by many that a burning sense of injustice which arraigned divine Providence obsessed his soul. The inspired edict: "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap," might be as just as it is immutable, but was there no end to harvest-time? Fifteen years was a long term of what he called in his hot heart "penal servitude," enforced for the hasty action of a passionate, headstrong boy. And the end might not be in sight for as many years more.

A sudden pause in the chat at the other end of the porch broke up his sombre musings. He turned to behold Mr. Rice in irreproachable attire of white flannel and cap to match, presenting the mail-bag

to the lady of the Manor. The receipt of the tri-weekly mail was an event of prime importance to the entire household. It was brought from the post-office three miles away by a mounted groom, who was fully alive to the dignity and responsibility of the office. One key of the bag was kept at High Hill; the postmaster had the other. It was rather a portmanteau than a wallet, made of stout leather and bound at the corners with brass. "HIGH HILL" was lettered upon the side—also in brass that was never allowed to grow dim.

It elicited a finished descriptive phrase from Mr. Winston:

"'Plethoric and portentous,' are the words that come to me whenever I see that brought in full. And I am as pleased as a boy when I am fortunate enough to be here to witness the ceremony of opening it."

Madam was too much engaged in unlocking and emptying the contents of the portmanteau upon her work-stand to heed the remark, but Helen laughed and nodded acquiescence, and Beth's silent smile was, as ever, ready to show that the speaker had not cast a pet saying into empty air. Madam concentrated her attention for the next five minutes upon the business of assorting the huge and motley pile, assigning papers and letters to respective owners. Helen was all a-quiver with expectation. As the youngest of the party she would be the last served, but in violation of precedent and decorum, she pounced upon the heap with a glad cry while

her grandmother was still busy with what the irreverent minx called in the minister's hearing, "dividing the sheep from the goats." That is, selecting newspapers and pamphlets and laying them aside to proceed at leisure with the correspondence.

"Oh! *oh!* grandmother! I know this must be for me from Emily Martin, who went abroad for her vacation with the French teacher! She promised to write as soon as she got over. And that is a foreign letter."

The words tumbled over one another as she actually tried to undo the hold of the restraining hand upon the pile.

"Be quiet, my child! You are mistaken. You are not the only one who has foreign correspondents. This is your father's letter."

She passed it over to him with five or six others, and went on with the distribution.

Mr. Rice withdrew a little space with his budget, *The Farmer's Register* being conspicuous among miscellaneous matter. Beth, with a murmured apology to Mr. Winston, opened and glanced over her one letter and then undid the cover of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Madam swept her mail into her workbasket and carried it off to her chamber for deliberate examination. Helen dropped flat upon the floor and tore open eight letters, one by one, before plunging into those she surmised would interest her most. Mr. Winston was the only observer of the gray pallor that drove the color from Paul Carrington's face

and stiffened the lines, as he opened the thin blue sheet his mother had passed to him. Then he crushed it convulsively in his hand and turned abruptly into the house.

Beth had a hasty glimpse of his face as he disappeared in the open door and was startled. Reflecting in a moment that the odd effect was doubtless a trick of the light shimmering through the vines, she gave it no more thought. Two of the group were to recall the trifling incident in months to come.

An hour thereafter, Paul walked out upon the porch, booted and spurred, hat in hand:

"Mother! I am obliged to leave in your capable hands the entertainment of our always-welcome visitor"—holding out his hand to the minister with frank cordiality. "I am called away by business that may take me as far as the court-house, so I shall not be at home to dinner." And in response to the mute inquiry of the mother's anxious eyes: "Trust me not to go fasting because I am not eating in my own house! I shall be at home in time for supper. Good-by, all!"

He stooped to kiss Helen, who ran after him to the top of the steps, waved his hat smilingly to the rest, and was gone.

Helen strolled back, pouting: "I shall never forgive him if he is not home in time to see my new party dress! It is a *love*, Mr. Winston!" reading indulgent sympathy in his smile. "And I am to wear it for the first time to-night to Amelia Carter's birthday party."

"I am sorry I am too old to be invited," the visitor followed her lead. "But I shall hope to have the pleasure of seeing the new beauty before it has lost its first bloom." He turned to his hostess. "I suppose you have been told, my dear Madam, so many times that your son is the handsomest man in three counties, that you can hear it again without a thrill of pride?"

She blushed as her granddaughter might. "I am more proud to know that he is the best son in fifty counties. Indeed, I have yet to see a better man!"

The deferential, affirmative bend of the pastor's head was inimitable. "Higher praise can no man crave than that from a mother's lips."

As if fearing lest sentiment might lapse into sentimentality, he arose and accosted Mr. Rice: "Mrs. Winston will never forgive me if I do not see the new hen-house and the distinguished tenants. May we not have the pleasure of your company, Miss Helen?"

Decidedly the incumbent of the Mount Hor church had learned to excellent purpose the article in the Pauline Creed that advises the postulant to be "all things to all men."

CHAPTER V

THE word "chaperon" was unknown in our neighborhood except to readers of French and English tales of high life. Yet the conventionalities fencing in the *débutante* (who would not have recognized herself under the title) were as rigidly observed as in fashionable circles in our day. If not convoyed by masculine relative, or an elder sister, cousin, or aunt, our Virginia party-goer took her maid in the carriage with her, ostensibly to put the finishing touches to her toilet in the dressing-room,—in reality, whether it were confessed to herself or not, to conserve the proprieties.

Beth Moore no longer ranked herself among the young girls of her set. That she was thirty-six years old was no secret to anybody. She stood serenely in her lot as a confirmed spinster, yet was never relegated to the "old-maid list." She was Helen's companion to social gatherings large or small, and of whatever character and complexion. The elastic appellation "function" was not to be invented for fifty years to come.

The Carters were near neighbors, living but four miles away. The party was in honor of the nineteen-year-old eldest daughter of the house, a general favorite who, it was whispered, would be a bride before another birthday rolled by. Engagements

were never "announced," only taken for granted and "whispered," until but a farce of secrecy was left.

The porch floor was washed white by the full moon, when the gay little procession swept out of the doorway. A private exhibition of toilets had been held in the hall, the blaze of a half-a-dozen spermaceti candles held high by sable attendants blending with the paler lustre flooding the threshold. Madam Carrington, her son, and Mr. Rice were an informal committee of inspection. Helen was at her most bewitching best and brightest in filmy white, embroidered with pink roses. Real roses, cunningly selected to match them in tint, were in the corsage, and one looped back a curl above the left temple. Pale pink shoes and long gloves were of the same shade.

"I never imagined you could look so charmingly pretty!" her father had confessed when admitted to a private view of the dazzling vision.

The chorus of applause below-stairs was unqualified. A score of dark-skinned spectators formed the privileged front row. At the far end of the stage and in what might be called "the pit" beyond, on either side of the front steps, and half-way to the gate and the waiting carriage, urchins pranced and gurgled low exclamations of rapture. Beth looked surprisingly youthful, yet with a gentle stateliness that accorded perfectly with her gown of silver-gray tissue which Mr. Rice informed her gallantly "matched the moonlight."

Madam Carrington stood alone at the head of the steps when her son and Mr. Rice returned after escorting the revellers to the carriage.

"I wish you could have watched the procession with me!" she laughed. "It was like a royal progress with the distinguished personages in their robes of office in the van, and an irregular dark line trailing after them. It was the funniest exhibition you can imagine. All that was lacking was the blare of trumpets and the shouts of the populace!"

"Which could have been quickly supplied if you had intimated a wish to complete the pageant," replied Mr. Rice. "A word from you would have invoked all the horns and howls needed to fill out the programme. For my part, I am most grateful for being allowed to see the principal actors in gala attire. I predict that they will be the belles of the ball to-night. No, thank you!" as the hostess waved her hand invitingly toward a chair. "I have a mass of correspondence that must be attended to to-night. You may care to know that my humble papers upon 'Poultry Farming' have excited interest among those whom I had in mind while writing. A dozen or more readers of *The Register* have written to me for detailed information."

"I predicted as much!" answered Madam heartily. And Paul: "Good for you, old fellow! May the good work go on!"

"I thank you both—from my heart. You comprehend that I would not have spoken of it to anybody else. Good night!"

"There goes one of God's noblemen!" uttered

Paul, when his friend was beyond hearing. "He will never get the title on earth. *Up yonder!*" He pointed heavenward significantly.

"It is waiting for him there!" assented his mother, and for a little while neither spoke again.

Paul lighted a cigar. His mother sank back contentedly in the depths of her armchair, and both feasted eyes and thought upon the picture glorified by the moon. The twilight that had tempered the heat of the day had silvered shrubbery and turf with dew. The air was crystal clear; the outline of the distant forest was drawn blackly distinct against the pale horizon. The song of the whippoorwill in the meadows was softened into music, and presently a mocking-bird in the nearest grove essayed an imitation of the night-bird, passing, as if in disgust, into an original rhapsody in perfect harmony with the hour and scene.

The listeners laughed softly at the transition.

"Wise bird!" commented Paul. "I hope Rice hears him! It is just the touch of natural poetry that will go to his heart. The office-windows are all open. He can't help hearing the serenade. He could write a book upon bird-lore, if he would. Hark!"

The bird was trilling a different *opus*—ineffably tuneful—it might be a reminiscence of wildwood—love and rapture—and loss—and pain!

When at last Madam Carrington spoke it was evident that her thoughts had not wandered far afield:

"I shall always regret that he never married!"

Her son started and turned his head in momentary bewilderment.

"He? Do you mean Rice? I am afraid it is too late to correct the error—if error it was!"

Madam answered in her most decided tone:

"As it *was*—undoubtedly! Always supposing he had chosen the right woman. Which he did not!"

Paul faced her abruptly.

"What do you mean? You suspected then——"

She filled up the pause:

"I *suspected* nothing! Naomi told me the truth the night before she died. What do you know about it?"

Response did not follow at once. When it came it was tentative:

"I have never spoken of it because I felt I had no right to betray even a half-confidence. I can say no more now."

"*I* was under no promise of secrecy. I kept my own counsel because I could not see that anything but trouble could come from telling the story. Naomi was heart-broken over it. And I guessed—I believe correctly—that more went to the deplorable state of mind and body that followed his sister's death than that event itself. We may as well stop beating about the bush, my son, and speak out the ugly truth both of us have known all the years that have passed over our heads since that wretched creature toyed with a man's heart as a cat might play with a mouse, and then ran away with another woman's husband!

"There! It is said! and you are no wiser than if I had continued to hold my tongue. In all the years that Mahlon Rice has lived in my family as one of us, I have never hinted by word or look that his dying sister had poured the story into my ears when she was too weak to hold it back any longer. I gave her what comfort I could by volunteering to care for the wreck that—*wretch* had made of him —as long as he or I lived."

Paul was on his feet and at her side. Dropping upon one knee he gathered her in his arms.

"Mother! I thought I knew before what a magnificent woman you are! I seem never to have appreciated the fulness of your glorious womanhood until this moment. When I think what you have done for him and to keep his name clean, his reputation unstained in the sight of the world—God forgive me for never fathoming the depths of a nature that makes all other women weak by comparison."

Her head lay upon his heart while he spoke. Her hand stole up to his cheek as he said the last words, and felt that it was wet.

"My boy! my blessing! Your love and praise would reward me if I were what you think. And to see what a man I have helped to save to us all has already been all the recompense I could wish. I am glad we have broken the seal of silence with regard to this matter. Yet I am glad we have held on our respective ways without consultation until the task to which we believed that we were called

by God was practically finished. My blood boiled while Naomi told of the various traps and nets set for her brother. Do you know that—*thing*—actually pretended to be under deep conviction for sin and even to have been converted by his teaching? She wrote dozens of letters to him while this was going on. Clever letters, too. She was the brightest girl in her classes and an omnivorous reader.

"Her mother was pleased beyond measure when Molly begged to continue her studies in Latin. Mr. Rice had offered to give her lessons when she confided to him her wish to carry on her education at home. Mrs. Watkins consented upon condition that the arrangement should be kept quiet. She was afraid there would be talk in the congregation if it got out. That chimed in exactly with Molly's fondness for mystery and intrigue and all that sort of thing. So he directed her reading by letter, and lent her books—and she wrote reports as a schoolgirl might, and contrived clandestine meetings at The Glebe under pretense of taking fruit and cakes and such things from her mother to Naomi. Then, I suppose she got tired of the play, and managed to get an invitation to spend the winter in Richmond with her father's sister, and—you know the rest! It turned out that she had been corresponding with the man who ran away with her, ever since they had met at the White Sulphur the summer before, hiding her tracks by mailing the letters in different post-offices and directing them to several

fictitious names agreed upon between them. The man came back a few months later, to wind up his affairs, it was said, in order to go into business in Savannah. His wife got a separation, but declared she would not please him and let him marry again by applying for a divorce.

"The Watkinses had no other children living, and after the father and mother died and the plantation was sold, the ugly story seemed to pass out of people's minds. I have not heard it mentioned in years. But ours is not a gossiping county, take it as a whole, and this scandal was somewhat of a reflection upon it. We were thankful it died so soon. It is not once in a century that a respectable family is disgraced by such an affair."

She said it without misgivings. The social cyclone that had torn through the respectable community less than a score of years before had wrecked no reputations. Excess of folly was the worst accusation that could be brought against High Hill, when it might be said to be the head centre of the temporary revolution. Cécile's most envious detractors had never dared impugn her fidelity to her husband, and his blind idolatry of her was a proverb to this day. His stainless life and decorous widowerhood would have been complete refutation of calumny had any one dared to circulate it.

As the silence succeeding her reminiscences became awkward, a far-fetched foreboding crept upon the narrator's complacency. It was no secret that the "creature" whose character she had figura-

tively cast to the moles and the bats was a mad worshipper of Paul Carrington's wife. Had her social status been lower she would have been called a parasite of the imported leader of fashion and fancy. As it was, Molly Watkins was envied by girls with less pretension to the nameless charm that makes fools of men and drives minor beauties to jealous frenzy.

It was plain that Paul heard the whole tale for the first time. He had surmised that his invalid companion in the foreign tour which brought back lost health and spirits had loved the frail, fair woman whose fall horrified the community. He had alluded to the surmise as having been born of a "half-confidence." It was right and expedient that he should be put into possession of the unvarnished facts.

And a more propitious hour and place for unrestrained confidence could hardly be imagined.

While they talked, the mocking-bird, waxing confident in his powers of improvisation, took new and bold flights into the heaven of song-venture, as brilliant as audacious. They could see him rising, floating, and sinking as upon a wave of melody, above the tree-top, carried out of himself by a fantasia of delight.

Madam laughed low again.

"He is excelling himself! All mocking-birds do not sing at night. I think that most of them go to bed, like sober housekeepers, and sleep until daylight. Naomi had one whose pedigree must have been crossed by a nightingale. He would sing all

night if she did not lock him up in a dark closet. Although he had lived in a cage for months, she fancied that he longed for freedom. She let him go the summer before she died. After that he used to sing every night in the tree under her window, and she fed him regularly—tender-hearted little soul!"

Paul made a palpable effort to fall into her mood:

"This fellow may be a lineal descendant. Who knows? We must tell Helen the story, I foresee that she will adopt our Philomel and contrive to make his acquaintance."

"The child is growing into a fine woman," returned the grandmother. "Philadelphia has done much for her."

A nameless quality in her intonation prepared the listener for what came next:

"We must not forget, son, that she is not a child any longer. Nor that with her temperament and ready wit—and other natural gifts, she must be guarded tactfully until she finds herself, so to speak. It is very fortunate that she and Elizabeth remain upon such affectionate terms. I believe that Helen speaks more freely to her than to any of her girl friends. And she could not have a safer confidante. So much depends upon a girl's associates at the time when her character is in the making."

"God knows that is true!" The sudden vehemence of the speech startled his mother. "And *we*"—the slight emphasis upon the word did not escape the fine ear of his companion—"cannot afford

to take risks. As you say, she could not have a safer guide, companion, and friend than the angel in human form who is with her to-night."

The solemn fervor of his tone emboldened his mother to make a daring move:

"We are talking as heart-to-heart to-night, my boy. Will you let me go further than I have ever gone before and put a direct question to you? I have never owned to you—or to any one except the Searcher of hearts"—head and voice sinking reverently in uttering it—"that the dearest wish of my heart for years has been to see her whom you call an angel—your wife!"

It was a tremendous moment, and even her spirit quailed as she brought out the words. Back of them lay years of unspoken yearning, of crushed hopes, of strong crying and tears when the mother-heart was unveiled to the Friend to whom unavailing prayer had gone up for—"how long, oh, Lord, how long?"

She had nearly said it aloud while she awaited tremblingly the result of her desperate stroke.

"As 'heady' as a steam-engine when once her mind is made up!" a blunt planter had said of her to Mr. Rice. "There's but one man upon the green earth who can make her budge an inch, and that's her son. She asks his advice once in a blue moon—yes, *sir!* and *takes* it! I have known that to happen a couple of times. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my ears. Ed Carrington hadn't a sneaking notion

that his soul was his own after he'd been married to her ten years. After that, he trotted as meekly in harness as a twenty-year-old mare. Paul's made out of different stuff. As good a son as ever trod shoe-leather if he *was* a leettle 'gayly' for a while. But there never was a sign of the 'etcetera' about him. Folks did think the Madam would marry him to Beth Moore, and it would have been a tip-top match, take it all around. They say Madam sets more store by her adopted daughter than by all her blood-kin put together—and she *is* a blame fine girl!—with a pretty property of her own. But young folks will fly the track at one time or another, and a match of quite another kind was struck by the boy."

Had Mr. Rice been privy to the present interview he must have recalled the summary of the relative positions occupied by father and son toward the queen of the home.

"This is very plain talk, mother!"

To a woman of different caliber the words and tone would have been the fall of a portcullis of finality. Her spirit rallied to the occasion:

"I told you just now that I meant to speak frankly. I need not remind you of how many years I have respected your reserve upon everything that concerned this subject. I am growing old. The future of the home of your child—of yourself—should be provided for. Should I die to-morrow the family would be broken up, and your child virtually homeless. These are hard facts. They must be faced."

He leaned toward her, elbows upon knees; his face, clearly seen in the moonlight, wore a smile that puzzled her. His voice had the undertone of affectionate raillery which nobody else dared use to her.

"To make your meaning plainer still, you would have me ask the woman I have rightly called 'an angel in human form' to marry me in order to keep the High Hill family from breaking up in the event of your untimely decease?" Straightening up, his tone changed to fierce demand: "Mother! do you appreciate what that little sentence implies? What right have I to offer the rest of a blasted life and the wreck of a heart to any good woman—to say nothing of a peerless pearl of womanhood, like Elizabeth Moore? Don't interrupt me yet! Do you suppose I have lived under the same roof with her all these years without seeing and knowing her as she is? She has been more than a daughter to you; more than a mother to the almost-orphaned child—to me—salvation from unbelief in God and in man! Great Heaven! Don't I say all this over to myself every day and hour that I live?"

The mother was not dismayed. She had met him and come off victorious in fiercer conflicts than this. He had admitted enough to make her sanguine of the sequel of the crucial interview.

"What have you to give her?" The query rang out confidently. "A man who has been tried in the fire and is not found wanting! A heart the truer and better worth the having than if you had never

suffered and fought—and overcome temptations to misanthropy and infidelity. Let us be reasonable, dear boy! Put another man in your place and—knowing our treasure to be what she is—what would you advise him to do?"

The fine sense of humor that had blunted many a jagged point for Paul Carrington loosened the tension of the scene. He laughed, in tossing a hand into the air as one might fling away a ball.

"If you please, I decline to put any other man in my place in the circumstances!" And, seriously: "Until very lately, I have not dared think of what you have spoken of as a possibility. I must get used to the thought by degrees, as it were—as a prisoner who has lived in a dungeon for years wears ground glasses for a while. And there must always be the consciousness of utter unworthiness. And *that* she, knowing all—must feel and comprehend!"

He got upon his feet and offered to raise her.

"I can't talk more of it now, dear mother! Thank you for loving me well enough to say all that you have said to-night! You must go to bed. I will sit up for the party-goers. I shall not be sleepy for hours."

As she gathered up her various belongings, the astute parent let fly a Parthian dart:

"It is more than likely that Mr. Wirt Cocke will escort them home. He has found out lately that High Hill is directly on his way to Beaumont, and improves the knowledge when Elizabeth may be met on the road."

Paul stooped to chase a rolling spool escaped from her work-basket and spoke incredulously—one might imagine, resentfully:

"You don't mean it? That old graybeard! How long has his wife been dead?"

"Two years And a man of fifty has no time to lose! Good night, my dear! Send the girls directly to bed when they come, and say that I hope they have had a pleasant time."

They parted at the open door of the chamber, and Paul returned to keep his solitary vigil.

The tall hall-clock struck one as he espied dark objects clustering about the plantation-gate a quarter-mile away. These proved, as they took shape in the white road, to be the High Hill equipage attended by two mounted figures, one on each side of the vehicle.

As Paul strolled down to the yard-gate to meet them, he recognized the well-set-up figures of Wirt Cocke and his jaunty son.

In their progress to the house the widower tendered his arm to Beth, while the junior took charge of Helen.

The quartette chattered cheerfully, lowering the hilarious tone, at Beth's initiative, in nearing the goal for fear of awakening Madam Carrington.

Father and son rode away down the avenue, watched by those left on the porch until the moonlight swallowed them up.

"Like a silver river!" said Helen's guarded subtone in kissing her father "good night." And nod-

ding toward the outer gate: "Do you suppose they always hunt in couples? It's mighty funny when it's father and son!"

Her father did not betoken enjoyment of the witticism. Instead, he waved a warning finger toward her grandmother's room. Perhaps his sense of humor was not in working order in the small hours of the day.

CHAPTER VI

THE fourth Sunday of May that year was one Helen Carrington was never to forget.

The whole family had attended church in the forenoon. The congregation was large. Church-going came as naturally to the respectable free-holder of the day as eating breakfast on Sunday morning—a big dinner with, perhaps, half-a-dozen guests, expected or impromptu, a postprandial smoke on the porch, and genial neighborly talk. The second service took the form of "plantation preaching," often in a part of the county so remote from the regular sanctuary that the denizens were alluded to compassionately as "destitute of church privileges." Or the "free church," owned by no particular denomination, was appropriated by the few Presbyterians resident in the vicinity for an "evening service," "evening" signifying so much of the sunlit day as remained after the two o'clock dinner. As a rule, a second church service on the day of rest and gladness was impracticable to worshippers who drove from three to ten miles over country highways to reach the church in season for the eleven o'clock service. In August of each year there were "protracted meetings" in the aforementioned Free Church, conducted by the Methodists and Baptists. One eloquent circuit-rider was

wont to name August "the harvest month of souls." Meetings were kept up for seven days of the week, and if the harvest justified the extension of time, sometimes for a full fortnight.

Mount Hor had the privilege, about once in three years, of "entertaining" East Hanover Presbytery in her appointed turn of succession. Those were high days no less than holy days. A protracted meeting banded Sabbath to Sabbath, and the county turned out *en masse* to enjoy sermons delivered by the ablest men in the Virginia pulpit.

Mr. Winston had preached on this third Sunday in May—a "live sermon" of an hour that let none of his auditors sleep. The customary gathering of friends and acquaintances followed the benediction. Hand-shakings and cordial salutations were exchanged before the congregation moved to leave the building. The murmur and buzz were those of a social assembly as the slowly drifting throng found its way at length to the doors where carriages of all sorts were waiting to receive feminine worshippers, and blooded hunters their cavaliers. Only aged and invalid men occupied seats in the family chariot.

"It takes me some time to get used to it all," Helen remarked to her father in a late-afternoon talk. "You see it is so different in Philadelphia, and I have been there more months in the year than here for two years now. But I like the dear Old Virginia ways best. It is *good* to think that I am really and truly going to live here altogether and always!"

They were sitting upon a rustic bench under a rose-covered arbor in the garden, "resting," as she put it, after a ramble through orchard and grounds. The weather was perfect even for May; everything that could bloom had burst buds into flowering. The ineffable peace of a country Sabbath was in the brooding air; the blue sky bowed benignantly over a smiling earth.

The image was born in Helen's mind, but she clothed it in other words.

"Somebody writes of the 'eternal fitness of things,'" she resumed thoughtfully as the subtle influences of scene and hour gained upon her imagination. "I can understand just what he meant on a day like this and sitting just here—and with *you!*"

The sudden, rapturous hug that stood for a double exclamation-point in her affectionate mood finished the tribute to nature and to her companion. He put his arm about her and held her close; a silent kiss left no need of words.

He had been very gentle and loving with her since her home-coming. She comprehended, as she fondly believed he intended she should, that they were to be, in future, chums. She was no longer a plaything. In leaving school for good and all, she had stepped into a place at his side. Henceforward, they were upon the level plane of man and woman. It was a stage in the wide beautiful new life she was to lead hereafter—a part—she added mentally and complacently—of what was no longer metaphysical but present truth—"The Eternal fitness of Things."

She took in great drafts of courage in the few minutes of pregnant silence.

"Father!" she broke it by saying, slipping her hand into that which closed encouragingly upon it. "There is something that has been in my mind constantly lately. Ever since we were in Richmond. Several things I heard there set me to wondering why I have never been told more of matters that certainly concern me more than anybody else alive. When I couldn't keep silent any longer, I broke out one day upon Auntie Beth. I am afraid I was very abrupt and unreasonable, but she was heavenly sweet, as she always is, and I got from her a sort of skeleton story of my early life. It was all true, I know, as far as it went, but oh, father, darling! I want to know so much more about my own beautiful, brilliant mother! Don't be angry with me!" feeling the involuntary shiver that went through the man against whom she leaned. "I know it must be painful for you to speak freely when you have kept silent so long—and that there are things too sacred to be discussed with one's dearest friend. But father! she was my very own mother, and I am the only child she left to you. Can't you talk to me of her, if to nobody else?"

He looked over her head, not into her eyes, in answering:

"What do you wish to know that has not been told to you? I must know first what you have heard."

The dry monotone was not encouraging, but

Helen was not to be quelled when the Carrington blood was up. She hurried on:

"Only that my mother's name was Cécile Larue; that she was a Southern belle whom you met in New Orleans; that you married her after a short courtship, and brought her to High Hill before your letter telling my grandmother of your coming reached her. That my mother was very beautiful and that everybody in the county was in love with her at once. Then I was born and she fell into bad health and you took her South to her friends for the winter. You came home, leaving her there, and better, as you supposed. She grew worse and you were sent for. Auntie did not even say that you got to New Orleans before she died. I took it for granted that you did. Oh, father! I am sure I *hope* you did!" burying her face in his bosom. "Then you brought her home. That is all of auntie's story," she raised her head to say, bravely swallowing her sobs and trying with all her might to speak distinctly. "But I ought to tell you that when I was in Richmond I met a Mrs. Poitiaux who told me that my mother was a Roman Catholic, and how good you were to take her to town three or four times a year that she might go to confession.

"That is everything I know. Really and truly! I have not one single thing that belonged to my mother—not so much as a bit of lace or a piece of jewelry such as other motherless girls keep and love—and"—temper rising with courage as she rushed on—"she lies there in the burying-ground

without a stone to mark her grave. And when I, a little lonely child, found out from a servant which was her grave, my grandmother would not let me take care of it, or so much as go to see it. Do you think it strange that, when all these things work like poison in my mind, I wonder what terrible mystery lies back of it all? My mother had relatives. She died in her brother's house. Why have I never known, or heard from any of them? My grandfather and my aunt, who died when she was but ten years old, have gravestones to let people know that they are remembered and loved still. For all the sign that my mother ever lived and bore the same name with me, she might as well have been buried in the colored servants' graveyard on the hill over yonder!"

She nodded her head backward to indicate the location of the hill cemetery. She had wrought herself into a fury of fearless indignation that would have alarmed the beholder but for the fascination wrought upon him by the sight of the convulsed features and blazing eyes. Yielding to the first impulse of horrified memory, he pushed her from him, and dropped his face upon his clenched hands.

"*Oh, my God!*"

Gesture and groan transfixed Helen to the spot. Never in all her life had she heard from her father's lips aught approximating an oath. To the Presbyterian conscience the ejaculation was profanity. Nor had he ever laid an ungentle hand upon her, or in her sight been guilty of disrespect to a woman.

Had she sinned beyond forgiveness in her blind fury? What could she do? What should she say? What mad words had turned her idolized parent against her?

Before she could stir he had arisen, and without speaking, took her by the arm. Not rudely, but in a firm grasp from which she could not escape if she were to attempt flight. The rose-arbor was in the central alley of the garden and not far from the entrance-gate. Paul Carrington struck off from this into a side-path, and then into another, following this until the cultivated squares were merged into an area bordered by willows and aspens and dotted with time-stained tombstones. These were not numerous when one reflected upon the antiquity of the plantation and the wealth of the owners.

But in the earlier years of State life, stonecutters were few even in the cities, and of sculptors there were none. A plain upright headstone or, more often, a huge oblong slab laid horizontally upon brick walls four or five feet high, commemorated the name and virtues of the deceased. Even in city cemeteries so little attention was bestowed upon the resting-places of the beloved and honored dead that descendants cast vainly about in their minds for adequate explanation of what certainly did not betoken forgetfulness of deeds done in the body, or disrespect to the names of deceased kindred. Moreover, as Beth Moore had explained to Paul Carrington's daughter, the devout believer in the life-to-come put out of mind so far as possible, and

as soon as he could, the thought of the "poor body mouldering in the clay," and fed fancy and faith upon the glorious imagery of eternal life and everlasting peace promised in all things and sure to the Father's children.

Madam Carrington was one of a mighty class of Christians who discountenance visits to the family graveyard. Hervey's "Meditations Among the Tombs" was in her library, but she had never cared to read it. The "God's acre" to which her son and granddaughter were now bending their steps was no more unpleasing than that of dozens of plantations in her county and State, but it contrasted forlornly with the trim fields, and the garden which was the finest of the region. The tall herbage that had masked mounds and memorial tablets all the spring, had had the periodical mowing the first week in May, and was now sprouting greenly everywhere. It was a level surface over an unmarked space perhaps twenty feet from a modest headstone bearing the name of "*Edmonia, daughter of E. T. and Paulina Carrington, aged eleven.*"

A giant weeping willow with a bole twice as thick as a man's body shaded the plot at which Paul halted. A rude seat of planks was set between the big willow and its neighbor, and upon this he sat down and took his daughter, trembling and mute, into his arms.

Every symptom of displeasure had gone from his face; the eyes that drew hers to look into them were warm with tenderness.

"My darling must not think that I am displeased

with her!" he said, and Beth could not have been gentler. "But there are things in the past of the happiest of us which hurt too much in reviewing them for us to live them over even in thought. I am glad we have had this talk to-day. It is best to get rid of hot spots in the heart when we can do it safely. I am glad, too, that you have had a true outline of your mother's life in Virginia. She was, as you have been told, a beautiful and brilliant woman and made a host of friends here before her health failed. As to your not having jewelry or other keepsake belonging to her, you must recollect that she died a long distance away from home. Nothing of hers was brought back to Virginia. She had one sister and two brothers, all of whom are dead. I know nothing of their children with the exception of a nephew who had led a wandering life, and whom I should not like to have you know if he lived in this country. His father and mother died years ago.

"You shall have your wish with regard to the tombstone. I can understand how you feel about it. No, dear!" as she tried to speak through a rush of hot tears. "Do not try to thank me! It shall be your memorial to the mother you do not recollect, I brought you here to say this to you. The tablet shall be a stone of remembrance to you and to me, also. A silent pledge that we, henceforward, trust one another so well that we will let no dark mysteries creep into our hearts. We will believe in each other's love and forget what we cannot quite understand of one another's actions. What do you say?"

They strolled leisurely back to the house as the sunset was flushing the sky. The rest of the family were watching it from the side-porch.

"We need not ask if you had a pleasant walk," smiled Mr. Rice into Helen's eyes. "You have caught the color of the sunset."

"The very happiest walk I ever had in all my life!" ejaculated the girl glancing brightly at her father.

"In saying it, she more than repaid me for what the talk cost me." Paul confided to his mother before he slept that night: "I owe to her what she asked for, and the debt shall be paid. I go to Richmond to-morrow to give the order."

In the depths of her practical soul Madam may have thought the sudden resolution a sentimental whim. She held back protest in word or look. The blunt planter had said truly that she never combatted her son's settled resolve. And that his will, once formulated, "had no etcetera about it."

In a month's time there arrived by wagon from Richmond a heavy box for the passage of which into the graveyard, part of the lower fence was pulled down. Workmen from the city accompanied the freight, and spent two days in setting in place upon a granite foundation at the head of a newly turfed mound an upright slab bearing the inscription:

CÉCILE
WIFE OF PAUL CARRINGTON
REQUIESCAT IN PACE

CHAPTER VII

"MR. RICE! I hope you and father will not forget the missionary meeting here at half-after-three o'clock this evening?" said Helen Carrington demurely at breakfast on the morning of July 2. "The thunder-storm last night cleared the air and made it delightfully cool. A full attendance is confidently expected!"

"Helen!" admonished her grandmother, shaking her head at the sinner whose imitation of Mr. Winston's best pulpit tone was inimitable.

The monitor hardly repressed a smile and the others laughed. Paul carried on the jest.

"We recollect it so well that we will leave written regrets with you that an errand to the court-house will compel our absence upon the auspicious occasion. Our horses are ordered for three o'clock, sharp!"

"You have much to regret!" Helen pursued gravely. "Miss Zephine Anderson has canvassed the county for 'suitable reading-matter for the poor deluded heathen.' She had a wheelbarrow-load of our best authors (expurgated) when I last talked with her. She is particularly proud of a second volume of Mrs. Hemans she picked up last week. The first volume was lost, or this would not have been given to her. 'Wasn't that just *too* provi-

dential?'" her powers of mimicry again in play. "But all of 'The Forest Sanctuary' is in that volume and several juvenile poems which the poor benighted savage children can learn by heart. 'Casabianca,' you know? They *must* have shipwrecks in the Cannibal Islands sometimes, so they will understand about the 'boy on the burning deck' and all that, you know? And then that sweet, sweet thing—'Prayer in a girls' school'—that I can never read without tears:

"'To make you idols and to find them clay
And then bewail their worship—therefore, pray!'

" 'Could anything be more appropriate for idolaters? It seems like a special providence that I got hold of the volume that had it in. But I always say there are "leadings" that are past finding out!' "

The flutter of a fan, picked up from the table, and a sentimental sigh and devout upcasting of the eyes perfected the comedy.

It was impossible not to laugh, and equally out of the question to scold her. Mr. Rice was the first to find his voice:

"Your talent is wasted in private life!" he announced, wiping his glasses before he could go on with his meal.

Helen glanced over her shoulder to make sure neither the butler nor his assistant was within earshot.

"You cannot claim the credit of the discovery," she retorted. "Only yesterday I overheard Mimy tell Chloe that 'Miss Helen suttinly ken take off colored folks talk 'tel you couldn't tell her apart from dem ef you warn't lookin' at her!' "

When the mirth excited by the last bit of drollery subsided, she was ready with another "subject."

"Father! I don't believe you thought that old Mrs. Harrison is to be 'in our midst,' when you made the engagement with Mr. Rice. I have it upon excellent authority that she has added ten new anecdotes to her stock in trade since the last monthly missionary meeting. You don't know what you will miss."

"My child!" interposed Madam seriously. "I do not want to find fault with lively talk, and I know there is nothing ill-natured in yours, but I must object to your speaking of my friend as 'old Mrs. Harrison.' It is not respectful. I sent the servants out of the room when the talk became personal. I have never allowed them to remain within hearing of unfriendly criticisms of acquaintances. It savors too much of gossip, which is the least refined species of conversation."

"She is entirely right, daughter!" affirmed Paul kindly.

Helen forestalled further remark:

"But, grandmother! how am I to let you know which Mrs. Harrison I mean? There are three of them."

"The senior is 'Mrs. Matthew Harrison'; the

next in age is 'Mrs. John'; the third is 'Mrs. Mark,'" pursued the *châtelaine*, unmindful of the broadening smile upon Mr. Rice's face and the answering gleam in Beth's and Paul's eyes, as the apostolic list went on.

The opening was not lost upon Helen:

"What had poor Luke done that he should be left out in the cold?"

"You are incorrigible, child!" was the sole rebuke the scapegrace received, and she risked one more shot:

"But, grandmother! you must admit that the good lady is in her anec-dotage!"

Disraeli had already coined the composite word, but so far as Helen knew, the play upon it was original with her. She had never read "Lothair." Nor, it is charitable to assume, had the wits who, a half-century later, exploited the witticism as their own.

It sent the party from the table in a merry mood. Yet Beth's eye did not lose the exchange of glances between mother and son. The slight shake of Paul's head and the uplift of Madam's brows told that the same dread was in the mind of each. The giddy child's resemblance to her mother in feature, manner, and speech grew daily more striking. The flippant rattle of the breakfast-table, irrepressible in spirits, unscrupulous in her play upon the salient peculiarities of her "subjects"—might have been the bride of twenty years agone.

Elizabeth Moore had once defined her creed to

Mr. Rice in one of the rare periods of introspective expression she granted herself:

"There is one rule by which I do not fear to be judged. I cannot recollect when I first took it as the law of my conduct: '*Whatsoever, therefore, ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.*' If I am a little weak upon other points of faith and doctrine, it is because obedience to this one takes all my time and thought."

And the scholar who had buffeted his way through deep and dark waters to the Isle of Peace, bowed a reverent head and bade her "not vex her soul with theological disquisitions."

"Live out your creed, my child, and the Master Who gave it to us, will see to the rest."

In his heart he added: "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

She was very busy living it to-day. Comprehending, intuitively, that Madam Carrington had distracting cares in mind besides the responsibilities of the impending "occasion," she tactfully assumed the entire direction of household arrangements for the afternoon and engaged Helen as her lieutenant.

"Leave it to us, just this once—please!" was her plea. "We have one or two Philadelphia kinks in our heads that we want to surprise country folks with. It will be great fun! Go out with Paul just as usual! The day is too fine for you to stay indoors."

When the pair returned from the "round of the plantation," they found the visible display of the

"kinks" in the transfer of a double-leaved side-table from the dining-room to the great square drawing-room corresponding in shape and dimensions with the chamber across the hall; an array of small stands, collected from other parts of the house, and covered with white cloths, ranged against the inner wall of the vine-shaded porch, and a profusion of flowers that filled all indoors with fragrance.

Helen, radiantly important, rushed forward with explanations.

The meeting would be in the parlor, the ladies sitting around the room until business began. Then the donations would be displayed upon the big table, and done up in bundles to be sent to Richmond, from which dépôt they would be shipped to New York, thence to Hong Kong or Labrador or wherever the heathen were in most perishing need of clothes and religious poetry. The packing over, they would have a picnic on the porch of cool drinks and cake, and such light refreshments. Bouquets were to be distributed to attending members as souvenirs of the most successful meeting of the season.

"'Where an enjoyable time was had by all!' That is the way a Philadelphia paper wrote up a Sunday-school tea-party last winter. It sounds so deliciously professional!"

"That's right! Get all the fun out of it you can!" was her father's grim comment. "Mother! you must rest as soon as dinner is over! I foresee what an ordeal is before you!"

"She wouldn't miss it for the world!" affirmed

Helen. "As to the ordeal—Mrs. Winston is president. Elected at the last meeting, '*vice* Madam Carrington resigned.' There were resolutions of regret by the bushel. I danced for joy. As if the blessed grandmother hadn't enough to do without looking after the souls of baby-cannibals, ten thousand miles away!"

In saying it she took off her grandmother's calash and led her into the house "to lie down until dinner was ready."

Paul's and Beth's eyes met in tolerant amusement.

"The witch's heart is in the right place!" said he. "And I wish you could know, as I do, how much you have had to do with keeping it there! I can never tell you half of the gratitude I feel for your work in that direction. And in every other mission of mercy, for that matter. It is a long story that I am hoping to tell you when the right time comes. I only hope you may not find it wearisome."

They stood together in the silent drawing-room, cool with gray-green shadows, and redolent of rose-scent.

The warm brown eyes that were her chief beauty were raised in frank pleasure at his praise.

"I love the child so dearly—" she began.

Then, as his look did not release hers, she hesitated, and spoke slowly, as if perplexed and groping for right utterance: "You exaggerate the little I have been allowed to do for her—and for any of you."

She came to a dead stop, the color mounting slowly to her forehead—then rallied her thought:

"You forget how much I owe to your mother—and to all of you."

He released the hand he had taken at the last word, as Helen flew into the room. Instinctively, Paul placed himself between her and Beth.

"What is it?" He had nearly added an impatient "*Now!*"

"Only that the dear grandmother won't sleep a wink until you are reminded that you are to draw the corks of the bottles—shrub, currant-wine, cider, and all, before you go. And see they are packed in ice. She cannot trust anybody but you or Mr. Rice to do it when there are to be so many drinkers. Mark! I didn't say 'drunkards'! I have promised for you that you would attend to it, as soon as you swallow your dinner."

Mr. Winston had as reported by Helen, "hoped for a full attendance of members of the Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society." The hope was bountifully fulfilled. By half past three, the string of carriages in front of the High Hill gate extended clear to the stables a hundred yards distant. The double-leaved table in the parlor was heaped high with parcels and bags; every one of the horsehair chairs lining the walls was occupied, and a dozen more seats of varying patterns and sizes were produced to meet the overflow. The society was but six years old, and, up to the last monthly meeting, Madam Carrington—unanimously elected at the

organization of the band—had been the presiding officer. Her reasons for resigning were sufficient for herself, and when she expounded them, convinced the judgment of her coadjutors.

The pastor's wife was the right woman for the office. She was in the prime of life, hale and energetic, and an adept in church work, having occupied this office in her husband's former charge and acquitted herself creditably. Madam pledged herself to labor as earnestly as a private as she had as an officer. In short, she had "made up her mind," and everybody who heard her say it comprehended the futility of opposition.

Mrs. Winston opened the meeting with an original extemporaneous prayer, an innovation upon precedent that was almost a shock to certain conservatives, reared in the nurture and admonition of a denomination that was pro-Pauline with respect to the sound of feminine voices in religious assemblies. Madam Carrington's practice was, after calling the meeting to order, to invite all present to repeat the Lord's Prayer in unison, her mellow contralto sounding the pitch and leading reverently. Then a hymn was sung and the secretary read a report. After which preliminaries the business of soliciting contributions for the next invoice of gifts, and packing and addressing those in hand was carried out, and the usual "light" refection prescribed by the By-laws served. Madam's strong common sense dictated that unrestricted hospitality would lead to degeneration of a religious service into feasting, if not revelry.

"I *will* say that was as handsome a prayer as any preacher could have made!" Helen had the luck to hear the wife of the Beaumant overseer (who was a Presbyterian, hence eligible to membership) whisper to a lady who sat near her.

The petition was well conceived and devoutly uttered. Then the fourteenth chapter of Saint John was read responsively, and the newly installed incumbent addressed the meeting briefly. After thanking them in a few well-chosen words for the honor they had shown her in electing her to preside over their deliberations, and expressing the fervent hope that their association might be for their common improvement in the Christian life and to the glory of the Master, she brought forward the first item of business suggested by her—a scheme that had been approved by the few to whom she had mentioned it as likely to advance the cause they had at heart because they would take a more intelligent interest in specific than in general work. She held in her hand the copy of a letter from a woman missionary in Ceylon which had been forwarded to her from the main missionary society in New York. If, after hearing the story the writer had to tell of existing conditions in that beautiful island, members agreed with her in deciding to devote their offerings for this quarter-year, at least, to the support of the Ceylon Mission—they could vote to that effect.

The letter was undeniably interesting and graphic. The deplorable ignorance and debasement of their sister-women in the island was described with un-

feigned feeling, and the plea for help in the task of bettering them physically and morally, and above all, spiritually, was touching in its very simplicity and tenderness.

Madam Carrington's deep tone broke the eloquent silence that ensued: "I move that, for the next year, the contributions of the Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society of Mount Hor church be devoted to the Presbyterian Mission in the Island of Ceylon."

"I second the motion!" said Mrs. Matthew Harrison. It was carried unanimously and enthusiastically.

Mrs. Winston held an open hymn-book, and looked over it at her audience:

"I think it would stimulate our zeal in the task we have undertaken if we were to sing two verses of the hymn

"'From Greenland's icy mountains—'

beginning with

"'What 'though the spicy breezes
Blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle.'

The hymn is so familiar to us all that I need not read it."

Beth had been notified in advance what would be required of her, and was in her seat at the piano by the time the president ceased to speak. At the first bar of the grand old tune, every woman arose

to her feet as by one impulse, and the music went with a will. Tears struggled with smiles of religious exaltation upon many faces as they resumed their seats. Ceylon seemed very near, and the pious phrase that had fallen trippingly hundreds of times from their lips—"*Zeal for souls for whom Christ died*"—had borrowed meaning it would never lose.

CHAPTER VIII

"It was more solemn than being in church," Helen said that afternoon to Mr. Rice. "And"—her face dimpling roguishly—"even old—I mean Mrs. *Matthew* Harrison—did not tell an anecdote for the next half-hour. Give me credit for not asking Miss Zephine Anderson if there are baby-cannibals in Ceylon. Somehow—I can't exactly express what I mean—but when one gets so much as a glimpse of the real thing—in religion, and in everything else—foolish fancies slink out of sight. It is only shams that are ridiculous."

"Thank you for telling me all about it," said the Little Minister, in his kindest tone. "And most of all, I am glad that you know the real pearl of price when, as you say, you get a glimpse of it."

They were in the office-door. Helen had run in to return "Oliver Twist" and to borrow "The Old Curiosity Shop." She fluttered the leaves carelessly as she talked.

"I am not a bit afraid of ministers, Mr. Rice. Most of the girls I know *are*. They are afraid they will be talked to on 'the subject of religion.' Ugh! how I hate the canting phrase! One girl says preachers are prime company six days in the week, but she runs as soon as they begin to quote Scripture. I think it is dreadful to make the Bible a bugbear. One of the first things I can recollect was

sitting in your lap in this very door and begging for Bible stories. You made little Samuel and David as real to me as if they lived on the next plantation. New Testament stories were the best of all!"

"Not 'were,' dear child, but 'are'! And when we talk them over in heaven we shall find that we have just begun to understand *how* beautiful they are."

Helen sat down upon the broad door-step and her host turned the rush-bottomed chair that stood on the turf beside the door, so as to face her. To remain indoors at this hour and in such weather was not to be thought of.

The acacia-tree shading the front of "the office" was in full flower. The rising evening breeze shook a cluster of pink-and-white filaments upon the girl's book. She picked them up and threaded them lovingly through her fingers.

> "'Our rocks are bare, but smiling there,
> The acacia waves her yellow hair.'"

She hummed the tune with the words, musingly.

"Auntie says there is a variety that has yellow blossoms. The home of the acacia must be Arabia. You know how the song runs?"

She sang softly and clearly:

> "'Come to the desert! fly with me!
> Our Arab tents are rude for thee.
> But oh! the choice what heart can doubt
> Of tents with love, and thrones without?'

"I suppose"—dreamily—"they are heathen *there*, too?"

"To whom the church has sent missionaries. Look at the bright side."

She went on as if he had not spoken:

"Ignorant savages, who never say a prayer, or hear of Christ; who beat their children to death when they get angry, and treat their wives worse than American men treat dumb animals. Men, women, and children who live like the beasts and die, generation after generation, and go—*where?*"

"It is very dreadful, my child! Thank God that Christians are awakening to a sense of our duty to the outer 'world lying in wickedness and sin.' The progress of missions in the last half-century has been most gratifying. And the promise is explicit. 'The knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.' I am glad *you* do not run away as soon as a minister quotes Scripture! It comes naturally to my lips and I say the words before I know it. Nothing of man's devising is ever so appropriate."

Helen was separating the pink-and-white strands of the acacia, and strewing them on the ground, but, it was evident, not in idle thought.

"Mr. Rice!" she broke out abruptly, "have you ever been to the poorhouse? What sort of place is it?"

He looked around at her in amused surprise.

"You mean the poorhouse in this county? I have not been there of late years. When I—before

I lost my voice—I used to preach there nearly every month. I imagine it is very much now what it was then. There are more inmates, I have heard."

"Tell me more about it! It is a dreadful place—isn't it?"

"If you mean by 'dreadful' that the inmates are starved, or ill-treated in any way, the county authorities see to that. The superintendent, the 'Poor Master' as he might be called—lives on the premises although in a separate house from the main building where most of the paupers are lodged. He has held the office for twenty years and must understand his business, or he would not be retained."

"The paupers!" repeated Helen, frowning. "Who are they? Are they all white men and women? And how many are there? And how did they happen to be there? Are they all there for the rest of their lives? Could not some of them make an honest living if they were given the chance to work?"

"What a storm of questions!" He patted the nervous hands playfully. "Give a fellow time to answer half of them! There are, in the county poorhouse, which would be an 'almshouse' in your better-spoken Philadelphia, perhaps thirty—maybe forty—people who would be a burden and a danger to the community if suffered to try to take care of themselves. Some are too old to earn a living; and having no relatives or friends able or willing to support them, have 'come on the county,' as we say. Others are lazy and inefficient and worn out by

dissipation. The law that a man must earn his bread by the sweat of his face holds good the world over. If a man is not able, physically and mentally, to do this, the community takes pity on him and sees that he is fed, clothed, and lodged for the rest of his life."

In response to the painfully perplexed face upturned to his, he pursued in a yet more fatherly tone:

"It seems hard, I know, but it is really the most merciful course that can be pursued. It is adopted in all Christian communities. But for religion, paupers would be put to death as offense to able-bodied and prosperous folks. Don't you see?"

She ignored the query again.

"Are there any colored paupers?"

"None except free negroes. One of the beneficent features of slavery is that the master regards his servants as an integral part of his family. I have never heard of an old or diseased negro who was neglected or turned out to shift for himself. You know as well as I do, how old and infirm and sickly servants are treated on this plantation."

"I know! I know!" impatiently. "Do the colored paupers live in the same house with the white?"

"Child, what a silly question! They have separate quarters in another part of the grounds. There are not many of them, and nearly all are able to do some work part of the time. The men take care of the chickens and mules and work in the garden. Nearly all the housework is done by the colored

women. They are, as everybody knows, the laziest creatures alive, and they would crowd the poorhouse if they were not forced to work when there."

The questioner grew more judicial in pushing investigations. All traces of her habitual flippancy were gone.

"You say you used to preach there once a month or so. Are there church-members there? If so, why do not their churches look after them? It is a disgrace to the Christian religion to let a brother or sister 'go on the county,' as you call it. Saint James would not have allowed it, I am sure. You recollect what he says about telling a brother or sister who is naked, or destitute of daily food, to 'run along and take care of himself.' Those are not quite the words he used, but that is what he meant."

The Little Minister laughed outright. He was fond of Helen and he was enjoying her hugely now.

"You've got the gist of it, all right. And let it be said in justice to the church of to-day, that it does take care of its poor. There are not many in our prosperous county. I do not think that we have one really indigent member in our own church. When I knew the poorhouse there were perhaps three or four paupers who professed to have once belonged to the Methodist Church. If they told the truth, the 'fall from grace' was far and hard. To sum up the facts in the case that seems to puzzle you—it would be hard to find a more disreputable

crew in a civilized land than the men and women whom the Poor Master used to drive into the dining-room when the monthly preaching service was held. He was very strict in requiring their attendance and insisted that they should behave decently when there. But it was a sorry show throughout—poor wretches! I had the horrors for a week afterward. The women brought their children with them, and they were apt to be noisy and there was always a baby or two that cried and had to be taken out. It was hard to restore even a show of order afterward. It is not a pleasant memory, you may be sure!"

Helen's eyes were wide with the excitement of a new discovery.

"Children! *Babies!*" she ejaculated. "You did not tell me there were married people there! Think of poor innocent babies being born and brought up in the poorhouse! They ought to be taken away and adopted into well-off families where they would have a chance to grow up respectable citizens. What becomes of them when they are old enough to be taught to read and to work? And how many of them are born to this fate?"

The bachelor under fire was restless. Unwilling to remind the inquisitor of Saint Paul's reference to things "not convenient to be spoken of," he writhed in the rush-bottomed chair like an impaled angleworm.

"Dear child!" he protested feebly. "As I told you, I know next to nothing about the condition

of matters at the county poorhouse now. And, to be frank with you, the subject is not agreeable or profitable. There are plenty of others better worth thinking and talking of!"

"Hindoo mothers drowning their babies in the Ganges, for example?"

The retort was more like a snarl than a sneer. "And cannibals lunching upon cold missionary! And Ceylon's isle that is not converted by spicy breezes and pleasing prospects! That is decent and edifying stuff for Presbyterian Virginia Christians to talk about and pray and sing over! And here within six miles of us and within four of Mount Hor church is what I make out, from what I have dragged out of you, to be a den of iniquity into which no 'nice,' God-fearing woman should step for fear of soiling her shoes! I heard something of this today but I could not believe it. So I had my reasons for cross-examining you." She was talking very fast and her eyes were live coals. "The delicate-minded sisters who rolled the savory morsel under their tongues were whispering together over the box of pious poetry they were packing for Ceylon. Grandmother will not allow gossiping at missionary meetings. But my ears are quick and I picked up enough to inflame my curiosity. They were exchanging poorhouse yarns by the dozen. The latest and most thrilling was the tale of a woman who used to live in this county and ran away to be married, ever and ever so many years ago. And now she has got sick of eating husks (and hers don't

seem to have been buttered) and she has come back to find that there is no father's house, and 'many servants,' and bread to spare for her. All her kith and kin have died or moved away to parts unknown. The only place open to the prodigal is the poorhouse. God help her! It's a wonder they took her in there! It was Mrs. Matthew Harrison who was best informed, as might have been expected. She is primed with anecdotes for a year to come. She had apologized for being late in coming to the meeting by saying she was 'unexpectedly detained.' It seems she heard the poorhouse tale at the Cross Roads post-office. She had her carriage turned right around and drove three miles out of the way to call by the poorhouse and 'get at the truth.' That was the way she put it. She was pouring it all out to Miss Louise Marshall, who had 'heard part of the story but couldn't believe it.' Mrs. Harrison certified that it was true. She had seen the Poor Master with her own eyes (she spoke as if she were in the habit of borrowing other folks' optics). Mr. Blankenship (that's the Poor Master's name) knew Molly Watkins as well as if she had been his own child, and there was no mistake—I beg your pardon!"

Her auditor had arisen hastily and brushed her shoulder on his way into the room behind her. Worse and worse! He shut the door and locked it. Conscience-stricken into a horror of remorse and amazement, and driven by the mad impulse to find a lonely corner in which she might weep out her passion of

dismay and anger—she sped across the lawn to the garden-gate and down the alley to the rose-arbor to behold her father and Beth Moore seated within in close converse.

CHAPTER IX

THE location of the Poor House was selected by the freeholders of the county, seventy odd years before my story began, for what were in their eyes good and sufficient reasons.

Imprimis and indisputable—the institution was not a credit to State or neighborhood. It was, at the best, reluctant recognition of an inevitable existing evil—incurable poverty.

Secondly, room must be made for the necessary buildings and grounds at as little expense and inconvenience to prosperous folk as was consistent with a merciful degree of comfort to the prospective paupers. Sanitary conditions must be regarded, since neglect of these would invite sickness and consequent increase of expense to the board of management. To appropriate for the site fertile low grounds and arable slopes would involve the loss of tobacco and wheat crops. Flat old fields drained into barrenness by successions of "yields" without enrichment of the once-generous soil, commended themselves to the economic interests of opulent planters. Belts of native pines and clumps of scrub-oaks would supply firewood for years to come and serve the double purpose of screening the uncomely groups of buildings that were to take shape with the increase of the pauper population.

Lastly, the projected eyesore must not be so near the public road as to invite curious or mischievous visitors and penniless tramps.

Accordingly, when, on the morning succeeding the missionary meeting, Paul Carrington drew rein at the by-road diverging from the main highway known as the "Richmond and Lynchburg Stage Road," he alighted to let down "draw-bars" in the "snake" fence of split rails hoary with age that stretched its dreary length for many rods on either hand. After dropping the bars back in their sockets, Paul remounted and rode slowly onward. The ill-kept road wound in a slovenly fashion, following the natural undulations of the ground through the aforementioned "old field." An expanse of yellowing broom-straw that brushed his stirrups when, as often happened, it encroached upon the wheel-track, was dotted by rotting tree stumps, relics of a day when land was abundant and laborers were lazy. Large tracts of virgin forests were cleared for the cultivation of soil black with fatness from the deposit of dead leaves for centuries past. Hundreds of acres were made available for receiving seeds of wheat, corn, and tobacco by "girdling" the larger trees eight or ten feet above the roots, and leaving them to die and decay at leisure. For years, crops were gathered from fields that had not had in that time one pound of manure or fertilizer of any kind. When, in the processes of nature, they became sterile, they were abandoned to tough wild grasses, and in the edges of the woods, to chincapin-

bushes. Clumps of these hardy natives fringed the belt of pines and scrub-oaks that mercifully veiled from the main road that which came into our pedestrian's view at the last crook of the wheel-track.

A long, low frame house, a story and a half in height was flanked on the right by a dozen or more huts, some of logs, others of clapboards. A smaller collection of log cabins constructed after the most primitive fashion, was on the left, and back of all were log stables. Beyond the houses a snake fence protected a garden, several acres in extent, from the depredations of straying cattle. In a wing of the main building lived the overseer of the poor.

The baying of three miserable curs brought him to a back-door. He waddled around to the front by the time the visitor halted at the horse-rack.

"Well! I suttinly warn't expectin' to see *you*, suh! and so early in the day!" he bellowed when within speaking distance. "I ain't seen you in a dog's age, so to speak. Shan't I have your animal carried 'round to the stable?" as the rider looped the bridle over a hook of the rack.

"How do you do, Mr. Blankenship?" said Paul, gravely courteous. "No, thank you! I will leave him here. I can stay but a short time. I hope that you and your family are in good health?"

He shook hands with the big fellow in saying it. Eight out of ten men in the county would have hailed the Poor Master as "Rashe!" and but a little more respectfully than they would have greeted

a free negro. He had sprung from humble stock and the fact was patent in every word and action. A majority of the board of freeholders were agreed that he was "just the man for the place," and backed up the decision by keeping him in it for a long term of years. His burly body, rising six feet in height, was encased in a striped blue shirt, without cuffs or collar, and a pair of faded nankeen trousers. His hair and face were of different shades of red, and a bristling beard a week old was shot with gray. The day was warm and his sleeves were rolled to the shoulders.

"Come in! Come in, suh! won't you?" he urged, stentorian and hospitable. "We are all right well, suh, thank God! If you don't feel like comin' in, I'll have some cheers brought out under the trees whar it's cooler."

"If you will be so kind?" assented Paul, and when the stentor had ordered, "Jake, you black nigger! fetch two cheers out hyar—quick as lightnin'! do you hear, suh!" the two men were seated in the shade of an aspen, their feet upon a patch of dejected turf, and far enough away from the windows in which Paul could not fail to see heads were popping up and down—to render conversation safe.

"Rashe" took the lead. He signed bills and receipts "H. G. Blankenship," and rumor had it that the initials stood for Horatio Gates who was a popular military hero when Rashe's father was young.

"Madam Carrington and the young ladies pretty well? She's a wonderful lady for her years. I often

tell folks they don't make sech any me'. They suttinly broke the mould after she was turned out."

Paul's grave smile was inimitable. He would not discuss his mother with the man, but while upon his premises, he would be civil.

"I thank you! They are all in their usual good health. I will not trespass upon your valuable time, Mr. Blankenship, but I am here in consequence of a report that has reached my mother and has given her much concern. Is it true that a person calling herself 'Mary Watkins,' and claiming to be one of the name who once lived in this county, has lately been entered in the poorhouse as an inmate? It sounds highly improbable to us!"

"It was so highly improberbul to me, suh, that I would 'a' swore on a stack o' Bibles a mile high, that it couldn't be true nohow, ef I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. She come here on the stage las' Wednesday a week ago, an' somehow, hired or coaxed a free nigger who come up from town on the top of the stage, to tote her trunk over here from the road. Wasn't that jes' like the ole Molly Watkins? I was a-standin' at the door as she came steppin' along, for all the world like she hadn't walked all the way from the Richmon' road—and says she—'This *can't* be Mr. Blankenship? You look too young to be the gentleman of that name I used to know! Time hasn't been so kind to me, my ole friend!' And with that up went her handkerchief to ketch the tears. She looked so beat-out I thought she was goin' to faint, an' I sung out to my wife

to bring some brandy and cologne. Well, suh, we got her into my house, and when she come to, she tole us who she was and how she had been married to the man she run away with, and how she'd travelled pretty nigh all over the worl' with him, an' then the rascal had left her in Injy, or some sech place, and she had worked her way on a vessel to Ameriky, and so from New York to Richmon', and spent her las' dollar to 'git back to the dear old county.' She'd heerd in Richmon' that her folks was all dead an' gone, years ago. Then she says to herself: 'I'd ruther die in sight of the ole home than live like a lady anywhere else.'

"An' when she foun' by askin' a man on the stage that 'Rashe Blankenship' was still in charge of the po'house, she made up her mind 'to come to me—and die happy!' Them was her identickle words. I believed her from the fust, suh. But my wife—well, you know how unbelievin' these women can be of one another; specially ef the other woman is pretty an' has winnin' ways with her. So, my wife she would have it that this mought be a smart empostor. She'd never knowed Molly Watkins, I havin' married her in Goochland for my second, after Molly run away. An' my wife, she must have some more evidence than my word an' hern. An' would you believe it? (it mus' 'a' been a 'specific Providence,' as my ole mother used to call it)—it come to me all on a suddint—that Molly Watkins had a brother as wild as she was, who went as a sailor, and died soon after he got back from one of

his v'yages. And in one of his sprees he got her to agree to have him tattoo her on the shoulder.

"I needn't tell you, Mr. Carrington, that me and the Watkinses warn't cut off the same piece of goods! But I reckon the ole man knowed his boy mought be in wuss comp'ny than with me when he went a-fishin' and huntin' and we see quite a smart deal of one another. We was out in the middle of Jeemses' River one day fishin'—when he up and tells me 'bout the tattooin' and how mad his mother was when she found it out, and how his sister stood up for him and declared she had made him do it, so's she could be ketched and brought back ef she took a notion to run away. And how the ole lady never knew nothin' about it 'tell the marks was healed and couldn't be got out.

"Maybe you mought 'a' heered about it? She used to joke about bein' 'branded like any other runaway.' She was wild as a hawk, and bright as a dollar. Now, suh, to come down to business—it may be accordin' to the law that this 'ere lady havin' been born and raised in the county, has a right to be taken into the po'house and keered for for the rest of her life, seein' she's no ways rugged in health and not able to work for a livin'. It may be, as some has tole me a'ready, that she hain't got no claim on the county, seein' as how she run away and hes lived the life of a common tramp for nigh upon sixteen year.

"Whatever comes of the dispute, *here* she stays as a visitor to my wife—if not a county boarder.

"Lordy! how I'm runnin' on, to be sho'! I ain't tole you yet that I let my wife into the secret of the tattooin' that fust night, and she managed to help her ondress—pretendin' she wanted to rub her back with linermint or somethin' like that. An' sho' as you are and I are born an' alive this blessed minnit, thar was the 'M. W.' plain as print on the po' creetur's shoulder!"

He extracted by difficult degrees a voluminous red bandanna from a hip-pocket and blew his nose sonorously.

Deep as was Paul's interest in the extraordinary narrative, he had not failed to see that every one of the front windows held two or more heads, and, glancing toward the wing of the house, he plainly descried the figure of a woman peering between the white curtains of a dormer casement. Now that the main object of his call was gained, the sooner he brought it to a conclusion the better.

"What you say leaves no doubt as to the identity of the person to whom you have given shelter," he said. "I thank you for going so fully into the particulars of the sad story. My mother will be very grateful when she hears of it. Mr. and Mrs. Watkins were her neighbors and friends and their daughter was a frequent visitor. My mother was much troubled by the strange tale she heard through an acquaintance yesterday."

Rashe nodded sagaciously. "Ole Mrs. Matt Harrison, I'll bet a hat! She come by yestiday on a-purpose to hear all there was to hear and I, mis-

trustin' what she was arfter, sent my wife to do the talkin'. *She's* got no use 'pon the top o' the groun' for the ole high-flier. So she got jes the plain fac's in the case an' no 'rousements, as you mought say.

" 'Tain't wuth while for me to say to you, suh, that you an' Madam Carrington (and *she* is born quality ef ever thar was one!) are welcome to anything I can find out for you." He raised a dissuasive hand as the other would have replied. "The truth is, suh, that Miss Molly Watkins always had a pleasant smile an' kind word for me whenever I happened to meet her. An' one Chris'mas I was trompin' along the road (hard-froze it was, too!) an' cussin' all creation because my ma was sick, and I hadn't had so much as a ginger-cake for Chris'mas gift, and up she come, ridin' her blooded mare an' in a blue ridin'-skirt an' a long feather in her cap—an' a spry young chap from town with her. And would you believe it, suh? she stopped short and ast me how was my ma, and tole me thar would be a basket of good things sont to our house from Mrs. Watkins's kitchen, and with that she took out of her pocket a shiny silver dollar and throwed it to me.

" 'That's fur *you!*' says she. 'An' I hope you'll have a nice Chris'mas!'

"All that makes me say what I do say, Mr. Carrington. Her that was good to me then, ain't goin' to find me a-goin' back on her when she's in trouble. That ain't my sort!"

Paul held out his hand impulsively: "I honor you

for the resolution, and if I have any influence with the board of management, it shall be exerted to keep the poor woman under your hospitable roof. She may have gone wrong in the past. It is not for us to judge her. If, at any time, I can be of any service to you in this matter, you will do me a favor by letting me know it."

A big fist, in color, shape, and texture not unlike a Westphalia ham, closed upon the other's fingers. The red bandanna was again in evidence.

"You may depend upon it, that I will do that same, suh! 'Tain't them that thinks themselves saints that has the softest hearts. I ain't lived forty-seven years in this 'ere world o' sin and sorrow not to know that."

"May I ask if there is anything my mother can send to you to make your guest more comfortable? You say she is not strong? Is she ill?"

"Not just that, suh, but weakly like. She's changed mightily, of course, in all these years—an' knockin' around the world as she's done. But she's mighty peart with it all! You wouldn't believe how much int'rust the paupers" (he pronounced it "poppers") "take in her already. She goes 'round among them and says funny things—jest as she useter, you recollect? and the children—Lordy! if you could see her with 'em! Tellin' 'em stories and carryin'-on like she was twenty, instid of fifty. She can't be far from that! She looks every day of it. Maybe you would like to see her for yourself?" rising with surprising alacrity for one of his bulk.

Paul recoiled with an inward shudder.

"No, thank you! It would be painful for us both. But you will not forget what I have said of our wish to be of service to you should occasion require? Pardon me for taking so much of your valuable time. Again I thank you! Good morning!"

Rashe walked to the horse-rack with him and stood watching the well-built figure ride away until lost behind the screen of pines and scrub-oaks.

"A gentleman, through and through, ef ever thar was one!" he muttered in the bristly growth on lips and chin. "I wisht he had a-gone in to speak to her, but I s'pose 'twoul' been a trial to both on 'em."

His wife met him in the house door, wild with curiosity. She was a scrawny woman in a purple calico gown and checked blue-gingham apron. Her hair was twisted up so tightly in curl-papers that the row outlining her forehead had the effect of pulling the eyebrows into two peaks.

"Well! *well!* WELL!" was the salutation that assailed him. "What did the high-and-mighty lord of all the earth want with you? Set down and tell us all about it. Every livin' cretur on the place has been a-watchin' of you two, a-settin' under the tree and lookin' like you was a-settlin' the affairs of creation."

"My *friend*, Mr. Paul Carrington, called to see me upon a matter of business that didn't concern you or the rest of the females who disgraced the institution by starin' out of every winder as if they

hadn't never saw a live gentleman before. Folks don't have sech manners now as they useter when we was young, Miss Molly."

"Allow me to make a few exceptions, Mr. Blankenship!" said the person addressed with a smile that aimed the compliment. "And you two did make a picture worth seeing, sitting in the shade, with the sunshine falling down upon you through the leaves. Mrs. Blankenship and I could not resist the temptation to 'steal a sly glance at you.' I am sure you have not forgotten that old song:

"'The Captain with his whiskers stole a sly glance at me'?

"It was all the rage when I was a girl. Ah, me! how everything I see about here brings back some memory of that dear old time!"

Her voice was sweet still, although it had lost the ring of her girlish days. The soft elisions and legate effects that characterize the *patois* of the native-born Virginian still lingered. Rashe's wife and Rashe himself would have pronounced the provincial phrase "about here" "'boutcher," emphasizing the first syllable slightly. But her phraseology was that of an educated gentlewoman, and as unlike the uncouth talk of her present hosts as if she had been born of another race.

She was dressed very simply in white with a black belt and necktie. A small cap of what was known as "bobbinet lace" was tied under the chin with narrow lutestring ribbon. Any garb more unlike

the dashing toilets of the Molly Watkins of the "dear old time" she lamented could hardly be imagined. There were radiating lines from depressions that were once bewitching dimples; the thinned lips were flatter for the loss of two teeth in the lower jaw and one—an eye-tooth—in the upper. The shoulders were bowed slightly and the stoop narrowed the chest. Yet the wreck of a once-beautiful woman had, in less than a week, completed the fascination of burly Rashe, awakened the jealousy of his scrawny spouse, and stirred the muddy pool of pauper-life to its depths. Her inquiries concerning the various families of note in the length and breadth of the county usually prefaced snatches and details of fresh gossip that were as honey of Hymettus and wine of Cyprus to the recluses who flocked to listen. She had tales, too, of foreign life that thrilled the starvelings with the sense of acquiring information that was an education in itself. With racy tidbits of each of these varieties of discourse she had kept Mrs. Blankenship passably tolerant of the prolonged conference under the aspens. In return, the returned prodigal had hearkened to an abstract of High Hill modern history that would have astonished any of the actors in the drama.

Shrewish accents struck in raspingly upon the reminiscence of the song of long ago:

"All we could see was that you were gabbling sixteen to the dozen, and he was a-listenin' very polite. What was it all about? You mought as

well let it out now, as to wait until you can't hold it in no longer. For I give you faar warnin' that you'll have no peace of your life 'tell you do. Don't be a downright fool, Rashe Blankenship!"

The baited husband turned his back squarely upon the tormentor and dragged a chair across the bare floor to plant it in front of the third party to the confabulation.

"Ez I come in here on a-purpose fur to say, Miss Molly, our frien' Mr. Paul Carrington of High Hill rid over this mornin' fur to fetch a message for you from his mother, Madam Carrington."

She laughed in his face at that—and made a sportive pass at him with the turkey-tail fan she was waving lazily while the chat went on.

"Tell that to the marines! The last time I saw the old calaripper she lectured me for flirting with half the men in the county and warned me that I would come to a bad end if I didn't turn right about and join the church. You must make up a more likely story, my friend."

Rashe roared at what was to him the most refined badinage he had heard in an age. He slapped his fat legs until they shook like oblong moulds of jelly.

"Fact—be hanged ef 'tain't! She had heard you were in town" (jocosely) "and wanted to know ef 'twas a hoax."

"What bird of the air carried the news?"

Rashe roared himself to a fine magenta—face, bare arms, and all.

"By Jingo that's a good one! *'Twas* a bird! a

turkey-buzzard! Ole Mrs. Matt Harrison who is forever snoopin' around for news. So she flew with the mouthful to Madam, and she sends her son and *hair* to know ef Miss Mary Watkins (as was) is a-stayin' with Mr. and Mrs. Blankenship at present. I 'lowed that she was, and he said his mother would be blamed glad to hear it, and how Mr. and Mrs. Watkins was old friends and Miss Mary useter be at High Hill quite frequent, and all that sort of polite talk. You may be sure he would say the right and proper thing always. Then I ast him if he wouldn't step in the house and see the lady for himself and he reckoned 'twarn't wuth while, seein' she wasn't feelin' too well arfter travellin' so fur. Then he ast if I'd let him know ef thar was anything he or his mar could do at any time for me an' mine, and 'reckoned 'twas time to go.' An' now you've had it all, Betsey!" wheeling toward his wife, whose growing chagrin was manifest. "'S'pose you 'lotted upon havin' a high-seasoned plate o' hash for your popper cronies—ole Aggie and Sally and Judy and the balance of the hags. Well! you can cook up one without no mo' help from me."

Without resentment or gratification at the tribute to her inventive genius, she did not abate inquiry:

"He didn't go out of his way, I s'pose, even seein' you two are so thick all on a suddint, to invite you to his weddin' nor say when 'twas to come off? It's all the talk (and it has been more or less for's long's I've lived in this darned ole county) that

he an' that meachin', mealy-mouthed ole maid, Beth Moore, is goin' to be made man 'n' wife at last! I don't see why!" with vicious significance.

"You *heish* your mouth an' keep it shet!" vociferated her husband. Further exchange of conjugal amenities was interrupted by a shriek of hysterical laughter from Molly Watkins.

" 'Meachin' an' mealy-mouthed!' " she repeated. "That's the best thing I ever heard, Mrs. Blankenship! I wish *I* had said it! I could see her standing there when you brought it out so patly. 'Meachin' an' mealy-mouthed!' I saw it coming long ago. I told his first wife that she'd find a spider in her dumpling some day if she didn't look out. And now that she is dead and gone—what's to hinder the wedding?"

Betsey swallowed the bait:

"Folks do say that she wouldn't marry him 'tell he put up a tombstone for No. 1. An' do you know, they say he paid a thousan' dollars for the one that come up from Richmon' this summer? Of course I ain't seen it, not bein' on sech intermit terms with the fambly ez Mr. Blankenship!" drawling the name sardonically. "But them that has got a look at it says it's fine 'nough for a queen's monerment. He must 'sot a deal o' store by her. Somè says that's why he ain't never married this one before. *You* knowed her right well—didn't you?" to the guest who was listening with the flattering intentness she accorded to the woman whom it was politic to conciliate.

"She was as good a friend as I ever had," was the serious response. "I certainly was mighty sorry for her sometimes. She and the old lady didn't agree very well, and the son, knowing on which side his bread was buttered, wouldn't stand up for anybody, not even his wife, against the ole cat! The baby is grown-up, they tell me, and a pretty girl?"

"Folks say she is the very spit an' image of her mar!" struck in Betsey, seeing Rashe's lips part. "I seen her two or three times at the cote-house when she come thar with her grandma and her ant, or whatever they make her call what's goin' to be her stepma' befo' long. She had big black eyes and white teeth and she looks lively as a cricket. I've heerd that Wirt Cocke's oldest son is shinin' up to her. Thar'll be no trouble in marryin' of her off. Thar's piles o' money in the fambly and her new ma is rich, too."

"And I hear that little Rice has walked in and hung up his hat in the High Hill hall for good and all?" pursued Miss Watkins (that was) carelessly. "Does he look as much like his name as ever?"

Husband and wife stared uncomprehendingly.

"Heigh?" grunted Rashe inquiringly.

"He used to be small and white and smooth—for all the world like a big grain of rice. I don't suppose he has altered much?"

Rashe doubled himself over his big stomach and haw-hawed.

"Ain't you the *beateree!* He does look jest like his name, and that's a fac'" but nobody else never

thought of it but you. *He* ain't never married neither."

"What *man* would care to marry him? And he's too ladylike to attract a woman." She said it wearily, picking up her fan and yawning.

"My good friends! this is very pleasant, but I did not sleep well last night, and I must catch a nap before dinner. If you will excuse me, Mrs. Blankenship, I will go to my room."

The invariable courtesy of her demeanor toward the pair was the cunningest stroke in a system that was enmeshing them as deftly and gradually as the spider casts his "attenuated web" about an overgorged bluebottle fly. She had a web of different mesh for each of her victims.

With a parting smile addressed to both impartially, she mounted to the upper chamber from the dormer-window of which she and her hostess had surveyed Paul Carrington, handsome and debonair, leaning back in the capacious "rocker" brought out by black Jack at his master's summons.

The temporary guest-room was a mean-enough place in dimensions and appointments. But Mary Watkins, in entering it, heaved a sigh of relief that was a groaning sob and locked the door. Then she stood in the middle of the bare floor and surveyed her surroundings. Four whitewashed walls bounded carpetless boards embrowned by the wear and tear of a succession of tenants, and that creaked as she trod them. A trundle-bed covered with a calico patchwork quilt, a pine table that did duty as a

dressing-bureau, two straw-bottomed chairs, and her own trunk made up the furniture. The wash-bowl and pitcher were of coarse crockery and the lip of the pitcher was broken. A curtain of white cotton cloth veiled the single window.

The unrepentant prodigal threw herself, face downward, upon the feather-bed that billowed suffocatingly over her head, and tore at the patchwork with her nails as a wildcat might claw the ground:

"My God! is there a lower deep than this?"

CHAPTER X

MADAM CARRINGTON'S aversion to neighborhood gossip was so well known that not a whiff from the tempting morsel of carrion purveyed by Mrs. Matthew Harrison, albeit shared with a dozen other cronies, reached the hostess. Beth Moore did not enjoy the like blessed exemption. Without inviting Mrs. Harrison's confidence, or encouraging the repetition of a story pronounced by the purveyor aforesaid to be "too shocking for belief, yet only too true," she was the recipient of enough to fill her soul with horror she durst not betray in language or deportment, until the last carriage disappeared in a whirl of dust down the avenue. Even then Madam must be persuaded for the second time that day to seek needed rest in the chamber, and the servants who were restoring rooms, halls, and porches to their ordinary aspect, must be cautioned repeatedly to move quietly not to disturb their mistress.

These duties done, Beth sought her prime counsellor, whom she had banished from the bustling scene of action to the rose-arbor an hour ago.

He had had an abstract of the startling news when the whirlwind, typified by Helen, overwhelmed them.

"Father! Oh, auntie! I have made Mr. Rice *so* angry! and I can't, for the life of me, tell why!"

was the preamble to a jumbled report of the dialogue in which but one fact was clear to the auditors. She had blurted out to Mr. Rice that Mrs. Harrison had talked of the return of the runaway Molly Watkins, and that she was in that *horrid*, dirty poorhouse!

"It wasn't a nice thing to talk about," confessed the tearful penitent, "but he needn't have slammed the door in my face!"

Beth's cool palm covered the quivering lips:

"There, dear! we will be more careful another time! Listen! Helen!

"The unfortunate woman was a favorite of Mr. Rice's when she was young and innocent. He hoped to receive her into the church. Her elopement was a terrible shock to him as to us all. *You* could not know that to hear her name so abruptly in connection with the poorhouse was enough to take his senses away for a minute. But you do know what a tender heart he has, and we must spare him, in this instance, as much as we can. Your father does not wish that anything shall be said of this story to your grandmother until he has had a chance to talk it over with her. She has not been quite well to-day. She ought to have a good night's rest. And you will help us to give it to her. Now—this is our secret and we will keep it. No! dear child!"—as the culprit would have prolonged the confession—"you have done nothing wrong—nothing but what I have been doing for half-an-hour. For I could not help hearing part of Mrs. Harrison's story,

and I thought your father ought to know what was going on. Now, you and I will leave the ugly matter in his hands. He is our confidential adviser."

The man who met and answered her smile, thought it the loveliest that had ever lit up mortal face. Inly, he compared it to the clear shining of a lamp through an alabaster vase.

Beth went on:

"Now, you and I will go up-stairs and get ready for supper. You are overexcited and out of breath. And I should like to freshen myself a little after the bustling day. I am glad we do not have missionary meetings every week. But this was very interesting."

Platitudes borrowed charm from her rendition of them. Nothing that had to do with the welfare of others was trite to her. Setting aside the ugly episode of the Molly Watkins scandal, she had found in the gathering elements of pleasurable entertainment.

Paul accompanied the two women up the main alley of the garden, parting with them at the gate. Then he went back to the arbor and smoked the pipe of meditation until the sun went down and the grass was heavy with dew. Instead of going directly to the house as he bethought himself that it was nearly supper-time, he took the path leading to the office. The door was fast, and all was still within. He listened for a minute and then knocked.

"Who's there?" said a weak voice.

"It is I, my dear fellow. I want a word with you," was the cheery response.

There was a perceptible pause in the muffled movements in the room before a hand was laid upon the lock; the key turned and the door opened.

"Feeling a little done up by the ride in the sun?" said Paul, in affirmation rather than inquiry. "My own head has not been quite steady since I got back. We old fellows can't take the liberties with ourselves that were safe twenty years ago. How close it is in here! It was all right to lie down, but you should have left the door open. And, man alive! your blinds are tight shut, too! No wonder you feel 'stewed'!"

He threw the shutters of both windows wide with a bang, and held out a hand to the man who stood stock-still and dumb near the door.

"Now, come into the blessed outer air!"

He half-led, half-supported his friend to the big rocker beside the door-step and pushed him into it.

"Now, Rice!"—with an utter change of tone and manner—"we'll have this out like two men. We are not gossiping old women. Helen has told me of her talk with you this evening. We won't waste words before taking up cleaner topics. I doubt if there is one syllable of truth in the report made by Mrs. Harrison of her call to the poorhouse. The story doesn't hang together, to my way of thinking. And Beth is of the same opinion.

"Naturally, the thought of the possibility of the

occurrence knocked you over. And, true or false, it has set you to thinking of things we agreed long ago were best forgotten for all time. Don't borrow trouble upon compound interest. It doesn't pay, old man! Supper will be ready in ten minutes. A cup of strong coffee will clear your brain. Go back to your room and dip your head into cold water—at the same time plunge memory into Lethe, and come out, made over!"

He knew by experience that heroic treatment acted well with the battered wreck of manhood. Knew, too, how gallantly the wreck sat the water when once more afloat.

At the sound of the supper-bell, the two walked leisurely toward the house. In rounding the corner that would bring them in sight of the occupants of the side-porch, Paul laid his hand upon the other's shoulder:

"Remember! the mater knows nothing, and is to know nothing until we have learned more."

The little minister did credit to his tutor and to his own powers of self-control, bearing his part in the table-talk and rallying so far from the effects of the ride under a summer sun as to introduce a novel and lively subject when the second cup of Madam's inimitable coffee had done its work:

"I got a letter at the post-office to-day that may interest some of you," he remarked, drawing it from his pocket. "I am sure that Helen will like to hear it"—smiling affectionately at the girl whose chastened liveliness reminded the two who compre-

hended the cause, of the calm of a sunset succeeding a thunder-shower. "Mr. Ruffin writes that the readers of *The Farmer's Register* want to know more of the Dorking breed of fowls. He says very pleasant things of what I have written of them. He would like to have another article, giving particulars of their habits and the English ways of managing them. And"—the white face coloring faintly and his accent deprecating—"he would be glad to get a picture of the hen-house I had built for them—and—and a sketch of the rooster, the hen, and the brood I wrote of."

The clapping of Helen's hands and her gleeful cry drowned the chorus of approval led by Madam.

"Oh! *Oh!* Oh! wouldn't that be splendid! You will do it—won't you, Mr. Rice? You draw so beautifully that you can make just the loveliest picture that has ever gone into the paper! I think I can see it now—and under it in big letters—'*Original design by Rev. Mahlon Rice, A.B. and A.M. and that ought to be D.D.*' Won't all of us High Hillers feel distinguished?"

"If we might have on the next page a sketch of Mr. Dorking, Mrs. Dorking, and all the little Dorkings done by our promising young artist, Miss Helen Carrington," responded Mr. Rice gayly. "Seriously, my child, you could do it—and well! Nobody who has seen your clever work in pencil and crayon could doubt your ability. All your family will back me up in what I say. Your grandmother and father were saying only yesterday that your

talent for drawing should be further cultivated and the instruction from which you profited so commendably in Philadelphia must not be thrown away. I recollected their talk when I read Mr. Ruffin's letter."

Here was a diversion indeed! Before bedtime the preliminaries of the joint undertaking were discussed and agreed upon. The work was to be begun on the morrow, and the results were to be submitted to a board of judges, composed of the three other members of the domestic group. It was not a presumptuous venture. Mahlon Rice had worked in an architect's office for two years after leaving college, with an eye to taking up architectural designing as his profession. He had decided skill with the pencil and delighted in exercising it. Helen's talent for sketching was an inheritance from her accomplished mother, and had been fostered by tuition under a noted artist who had classes in her Philadelphia seminary.

She confided to Beth after they had at last consented to postpone further talk upon the all-absorbing theme until the morning, that she had "always cherished an ambition to be distinguished in some way."

"I dreamed once that I might become an author. Or a musician. But at heart I longed to make visible creations with my fingers! I see pictures when my eyes are shut, and I never look at a fine landscape without wishing I could reproduce it upon paper. I love! love! *love* to draw! And to have one

of my pictures engraved! I shall not sleep a wink for thinking of it! *That* is something to get up for in the morning! Half of the time I lie still upon awaking and wonder if there is anything in the world worth the trouble of getting out of bed and dressing. Without some fixed purpose this old life of ours is such a dreary, monotonous grind!"

"It is not kind to remind you of what you said less than two months ago when you expressed just the opposite feelings or opinions," smiled Beth. "Or I might quote something very pretty and poetical about the joy of being alive! But that was in the morning when you and the world were young and new. This is too late at night for sober people like us to be awake and up, and you have had a very trying day. Give life another chance. Put off sentencing it until to-morrow."

In five minutes after her head touched the pillow Helen was fast asleep. Beth lay awake, perfectly still, without word or sigh, until midnight, awakening again when the east window toward which she was gazing showed a sky barred with pink. Every bird in the grove was aroused and set to singing by the whistle of the catbird that was raising a brood in the acacias shading the office. Beth wondered if the occupant were awake to hear it. Had he banished memories long enough to snatch a few hours of restful oblivion? Then, with the unaccountable proclivity of the grotesque to force itself upon the saddest and most sacred musings, there drifted to her an incident in a story she had read last Sunday. One

of the charming "Franconia Tales"—that delighted our foremothers and dropped into their children's minds seeds that were to spring up unto everlasting life—told of a woman, widowed and poor, who lived with her only son in a small farmhouse in the shadow of "Old Hoaryhead," the mountain that gave name to the book. They had had hopes they believed were well grounded of removing to a better home under changed circumstances and built numerous plans for the life they should lead there. Like the rush of an avalanche from the mountainside fell news that their dreams were only dreams, and the crushing consciousness of the folly and hopelessness of it all. For two days gloom reigned unbroken in the little home and the widow lost faith in God as in man. On the third evening she aroused suddenly to the perception of the wickedness of unfaith and the wrong to her boy done by her despondency.

"Can't we think of something that will take our minds off our trouble and make us feel like work again?" she said.

"Gilbert" was ready with an answer: "We might make some maple-sugar candy!"

The result of the homely experiment proved the boy's shrewd common sense.

Beth laughed low to herself in thinking of the Dorking portraits:

"A revised version of the maple-sugar candy."

Amusement was banished by the next thought. Perhaps, after all, the unlikely rumor circulated

by Mrs. Harrison might be true. What would be the effect of the revelation upon the man who once loved the lost creature? Her name still had power to move him out of his habitual calmness. Would the spell of homely magic avail against the cruel force of mean and sordid and debasing fact? Mary Watkins ("Molly" to a host of friends) had been the dashing belle of the region. Her fall was an abiding horror and shame in the history of the last twelve years. Tales of her pranks, her conquests, her sayings were still retailed with mingled pride and regret. Such an ignoble end of her career was incredibly repulsive. The thought was not to be harbored for an instant.

Putting misgivings and uncomfortable imaginations aside with her wonted quiet determination, she would not allow herself to dwell upon the possible result of Paul's morning ride. Madam Carrington and herself were in his confidence. Nobody else suspected any mystery in the excursion. He often spent half the day in the saddle, and business errands were numerous.

Before he mounted, he, his mother, and Beth went down to what Helen had dubbed "the Dorking villa," to see the beginning of the "study" of building and inmates. It was a fine fresh morning and the "villa" yard, enclosed by a neat picket fence over which convolvulus and honeysuckle were rioting, was merry with crow and cackle chirpings. Each artist, drawing-board in hand, was intent upon getting the right lights, and in Helen's case

the most effective poses of "subjects." She was perched upon a high stool in the open gate, Mrs. Dorking and her brood—attracted into the centre of the enclosure by an unusually lavish morning meal—were grouping themselves satisfactorily.

"As if they knew what I expect of them!" whispered the enchanted limner, brandishing her crayon warningly. "Don't disturb them! When you come back you shall see—well, what you shall see!"

She was established at a table in the shadiest, quietest end of the side-porch when her father mounted the steps on his return. The table was strewed with sketches by the help of which, as she had informed her grandmother and Beth, who were at work in their accustomed corner, she "hoped to make a composition that would suit her and send everybody else into raptures of admiration."

"Don't come a step nearer!" she cried, shaking her crayon threateningly at her father. "Nobody is to see it until it is finished! It is to be my *chef-d'œuvre* and make my reputation!"

"All right!" assented Paul. "And not to interfere with the concentration of all your faculties upon the masterpiece, I shall take your grandmother out of hearing for a little business talk. Will you come, too, Beth? As soon as I saw the artist I noticed the 'eyes in wild frenzy rolling.' We will leave them to roll undisturbed."

Madam Carrington exclaimed at the serious face turned to her as the trio entered the chamber: "It *was* true then? Are you perfectly certain?"

He held back nothing. The picture that had obsessed his fancy all the way home, he unfolded to them. Rashe had painted it forcefully and the listener's imagination supplied all that was missing.

When Paul ceased speaking a stillness that might be felt filled the great room for a long tense minute. Beth sat with averted face, her hands locked in her lap, painful crimson dyeing cheeks and forehead. Paul had not sat down while he talked and now stood by the window, staring into the distance.

At length Madam Carrington spoke, her voice steady, her eyes stern:

"We have learned the truth, and nothing could be worse. Investigation was a duty we owed to our old friends, the father and mother of the wretched woman. We can do nothing more. She would not accept anything from us, if what the overseer reports of her tone and conduct be true. She has chosen her mode of life, and has no disposition to change it. There let the very disagreeable matter rest."

"You do not think then," Beth ventured, timidly, "that it might be well for you to see her? She was fond of you when she was a little girl. I recollect how pretty and bright and engaging she was. I was always delighted when she came to see us."

Madam Carrington's dressmaker was fond of saying that that lady's "back was as flat as a girl's." She sat two inches taller now and as straight as a young pine.

"Go to see her, my child! A woman steeped to

the lips in iniquity, and glorying in her shame! Who deliberately selects as a home for her declining years a foul den like the county poorhouse! From what I hear of the inmates and their manners and morals, she seems to be in congenial society. It is a place no decent woman can visit and retain her self-respect. I am astonished that Maria Harrison demeaned herself by calling there, even"—sardonically—"for the gratification of worse-than-idle curiosity."

"But"—in a desperate attempt to soften the harsh decree—"things being what they are, and with her antecedents, where else could she go? Don't be displeased with me, dear aunt! But what Paul has told us makes my heart ache. I wish there were some way of saving her!"

Rhadamantha was never harsh with her adopted daughter. She was conscientiously firm now.

"Child! when you have seen as much of human nature as I have, you will comprehend that the most hopeless of sinners is a thoroughly depraved woman. There is more hope of the drunkard and murderer than of her. If the daughter of my old friend (we were schoolmates) were ill or starving, or in any other kind of physical suffering, I would do all in my power to help her. As it is, the cause of morality and religion requires that I should keep away from her, and have it distinctly understood why I will have nothing to do with her. Before we quit the subject let me remind you both, that Helen must hear none of the particulars her father

has told us. They are not fit for a girl of her age to think and talk of. It should be enough for her to know that the woman in the poorhouse *is*—Mary Watkins; that she is content to remain there and does not care to meet her former acquaintances. Do not feed her overlively imagination with notions of the repentant Magdalene and all that stuff.

"Now, children! a more important point is how the revolting facts are to be told to Mr. Rice. Yet one might suppose that the ugly truth would cure any fondness he may have had for the abandoned creature years ago!"

"Unless you object, I will take the painful task upon myself." Paul spoke quietly but decidedly. Beth knew that the question was settled. The perverse sense of humor which was at once her ally and tormentor in crucial moments thrust upon memory the speech of the rude-spoken planter reported to her by a tactless gossip:

"There is no etcetera about him!"

It was not a surprise when Madam replied gravely:

"Manage it as you like, my son. We shall not interfere and there will be no questions asked."

CHAPTER XI

On the second Sunday in July Mr. Winston gave out two special notices from the Mount Hor pulpit:

(1) "There will be plantation preaching at High Hill at half past three o'clock to-day. A cordial invitation is extended to all residents of the neighborhood to attend."

(2) "A called meeting of the Ladies' Missionary Society will be held at The Glebe on Wednesday next at four o'clock, by order of the president."

"Plantation preaching" was a religious function which could be counted upon for at least one Sunday in each summer month, sometimes for two.

For forty years Madam Carrington had filled a standing order for two such meetings at her home, during the season. If, from any untoward circumstance, the planter who had registered next in line could not offer his premises, she held herself ready to act as his substitute. She said, and truly, that she esteemed it a privilege to do this.

The twentieth-century reader has no historical data that will fit him to estimate correctly the systematic and conscientious care bestowed by the Virginian slaveholder upon the religious education of his servants. Churchgoing was not only encouraged, but insisted upon when opportunity offered, and masters and mistresses submitted cheer-

fully to personal inconveniences that employees of both sexes might attend the nearest place of public worship.

All this was secondary in importance to the religious instruction given to young and old upon plantations presided over by Christian owners. Bible classes were held, conducted usually by the mistress, or one of the daughters of the house; a fair percentage of colored boys and girls were taught to read and took their part in responsive readings at these classes. The Scriptures were read by one of the ladies of the family to the sick and aged on the plantation, and instruction in the spiritual meaning of chapter and verse imparted freely and gladly. The cardinal truths of Christianity and the working rules of Christian faith and practice were as familiarly known and spoken of by the colored population as by their instructors. Madam Carrington freely confessed to her chaplain and friend, Mr. Rice, that she had learned lessons of as rich religious experience from her elderly servants (whom they never spoke of as "slaves") as from licensed clergymen or from saintly associates of her own rank.

The High Hill plantation had a State-wide reputation for excellent management, efficiency, and consequent prosperity. Its praise was in all the churches for the parental care exercised by the proprietors over the moral, mental, and spiritual welfare of their dependents. Under the sway of the present mistress, it had gained, not lost, in all these respects. She was strict, but never hard, much less unjust. The

dullest of her serfs comprehended that she held herself responsible to a Master whom she served, night and day, with all her heart and soul. The pious souls to whom she ministered in her round of duty felt that she recognized a bond of union with them mightier than any earthly relation could cement.

The Sunday that brought preacher and congregation to her home was a "high" and, in the true sense of the word, a "holy day."

On this second Sunday in the month as "Ung' Cyrus," the head man, said to his mistress—in announcing that "all things were now ready for the meetin'"—"A'peared-like it had been made a-purpose."

"I thanked the Lord with all my might las' night when the thunder-storm wuk me up, for, sez I, dis will suttinly lay de dus' an' freshin de a'r for tomorrer."

Madam had come out upon the front porch at his request and surveyed the scene with devout complacency.

The tulip-poplars shading the spacious front yard were perhaps a century old, and had been carefully tended from saplinghood. The brown boles shot heavenward without a curve for thirty and forty feet to support superb crowns of foliage. The turf beneath was green velvet and brocaded with gold thread where the sunbeams wove a pattern upon it. Rows of benches were ranged in the "contiguity of shade" cast from the house to the iron

entrance-gate. One wing of this bore in a scroll "P," the other a "C," as big and rusty. The first American Paul Carrington had set up the gate.

The shrubbery was in freshest trim; yellow jasmine mingled spicy breaths with the milder fragrance of honeysuckle and day-lilies. The porches in front and at the side were furnished with chairs for pale-faced worshippers.

"We have indeed reason to be thankful, Cyrus!" said the mistress. "The rain was needed, and the weather could not be pleasanter. You have arranged everything out there beautifully. How many have you provided seats for?"

"I 'lowed room for three hund'ed, my mistis. Ef so be that mo' should come, we ken fotch mo' benches."

She nodded approval. "Mr. Winston was kind enough to tell me to-day what hymns he will give out. Miss Helen handed the list to Myra."

"Yes, mistis. She have tole de choir what they are to sing. 'Scuse me, ma'am, but do you s'pose Mrs. Winston will 'company de reveren' gentleman dis evenin'?"

"She told me this morning that we might expect her."

"Dey *do* say she is a mighty fine lady," pursued the head man. "An' Sis' Mandy, she was a-tellin' in de kitchin las' night how she has done a heap o' good to dem po' despised heathens 'cross de sea."

Madam smiled: "She is president of our Ladies' Missionary Society and is doing much good in awak-

ening our interest in the heathen to whom Christians in America ought to send the Gospel. There is a carriage at the far gate. See that the men are ready to look after the horses and that the carriages are not left in the way of others that come later."

The congregation in the porches and out-of-doors was as large as had been expected. Mr. Winston stood at the top of the front steps, a small stand beside him on which were Bible, hymn-book, and a glass of water. Below, at his right, sat the "choir" of ten women and as many men, each with book in hand. They were trained in singing by Beth and Helen, voices and talent having been intelligently selected. It was the pastor's habit to commit the musical service to the larger part of the congregation collected upon the lawn, and to call upon certain of the same to lead in two of the prayers. He began the services with a brief invocation and read the whole of the first hymn:

"'All hail the power of Jesus' name,
Let angels prostrate fall!
Bring forth the royal diadem
And crown Him Lord of all!'"

Beth had met the singers by appointment in "Mammy Tina's house" at two o'clock and given a running commentary upon the text of each hymn.

"It is wrong to sing sacred words without knowing what they mean," was her preamble. "And we enjoy hymns much more when we understand what we are singing."

They rendered the glorious old canticle with vigor and feeling, and all joined in lustily. Through forest and over hill and meadow for a full mile around rolled the cataract of jubilant sound, and one might have believed that the blue heavens bowed to listen.

"I could not sing for the tears that choked me," Mrs. Matthew Harrison reported to a friend who had not been present that afternoon. "It was like heaven let down to earth!"

We may observe, in passing, that the incident added a thrilling anecdote to her collection.

The thirty-fifth psalm and the last chapter of Revelations were read and the preacher announced his text:

"*The Spirit and the bride say 'Come.' And let him that heareth say 'Come!' And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.*"

"Just the right subject for a July day!" whispered Helen to Amy Carter, who sat next to her.

The theme was wisely chosen and the treatment was tactfully adapted to the audience. The speaker knew them too well to "talk down to them." He was also clever enough to enforce great truths by illustrations drawn from every-day life and the natural world and occupations familiar to them. Instead of stooping to the intelligence of men of low estate, he uplifted them. The gift is rare—in the sacred desk, and few there be that have it. This man gathered many colored members into the Presbyterian Church while he held the Mount Hor pas-

torate. He would have it that the harvest began with seed cast into soil made good by the faithful teachings of the High Hill household of faith. He may have been right.

"Ung' Cyrus" was called upon for the concluding prayer.

"And supplied the inevitable touch of grotesqueness!" moaned Beth as the afternoon exercises were talked over in the domestic junta on the porch that evening.

And Madam Carrington: "I might have foreseen that he had something 'notable' in mind when he asked me if Mrs. Winston were coming."

For the head man had prayed at length for "de great and notable man of Gawd set over us in sperritual things, from de rivers to de ends of de yearth. May he go in an' come out befo' us for many mo' years to come an' find parstur from de rivers to de ends of de yearth.

"An' specially bless her whom Thou has given him to be a pardner, in dese low groun's of sin and sorrow from de rivers to de end of de yearth. May dey live togedder like two turtel-doves in one nes' wid never a jar between, from de rivers to de end of de yearth!"

"Mother!" pleaded Paul when he could articulate for laughing at Helen's vivid repetition of the flight of oratory. "Can't you speak plainly to Cyrus and make him comprehend that this sort of thing must not happen again? It ruined the whole service!"

"For us, perhaps, my son. Not for those for whom it was held. We cannot run them into our mould without violence to nature. Cyrus's siege of the throne of grace in behalf of the blessed woman (who is sensible enough to take the will for the deed) did not offend the taste of a single person of his color. Indeed, they thought it fine. You heard how fervently they responded 'Amen!' I would not hurt Cyrus's feelings for the world. But I *will* have a talk with his wife and give her to understand that he must choose his words more carefully in future."

Mr. Rice took up the tale:

"The incident reminded me of something of the same sort that befell me years ago when I was young in the ministry. It was my first experience in plantation preaching, and the colored brother who closed the meeting with prayer, besought the Lord that I might soon cease from my labors and that my works might follow me!

"Fact! my dear fellow! Sometimes, in my morbid hours, I have thought that he may not have asked so far amiss as I imagined then. I have certainly ceased from one field of labor and as for my works——"

"Hear him!" ejaculated Helen indignantly. "If you are going to say something disrespectful of the Dorkings and your works in their behalf, I won't stay to listen! Good night, all!"

"The minx is wiser than her teachers," said Madam, rising to follow her granddaughter's lead.

"We will listen to no heresies after the peaceful Sabbath we have enjoyed. May it be many a year before your good works follow you to heaven, dear Mr. Rice! What would High Hill be without you, 'our guide, philosopher, and friend'? Good night and pleasanter dreams than that last remark of yours is likely to invoke!"

The two men, left together, looked lovingly after the retreating forms:

"'And they shall walk in white array!'" murmured the Little Minister feelingly. "When we reflect upon what is left us, it is rank blasphemy to complain. To-day has truly been a feast of wine upon the lees—of wine well refined! How aptly the gracious words come in when our better selves are allowed fair play!"

"I will walk over to the office with you, if you don't mind?" Paul spoke with seeming carelessness in rising to his feet.

The moon was up when they got to the office-door and Mr. Rice brought out another chair.

"You have something to say? Out with it!"

"Nothing worth worrying over. But it has pestered me ever since the notion got into my head. Like a strand of gossamer that catches on the eyelids when one is walking in the woods and can't be got rid of for ever so long. Did you happen to see a woman dressed in black with a blue veil over her face, who came late into church and sat near the door this morning?"

"I did not. What of her?"

"I was on the other side of the church, but sitting against the wall, so that by turning my head slightly I had a tolerably fair view of her. Something vaguely—and I may say, disagreeably familiar—about her impressed me. I caught myself glancing over my shoulder toward her several times during the service. When the last prayer was over, I looked in that direction, but she was not there. She had disappeared during the prayer.

"After we got home I questioned Aleck who, sitting in the servants' seats far back in the church, slips out the minute the benediction is pronounced to get the horses ready. Yes! he had noticed the lady and more particularly because she walked very fast away from the church and down the road where she jumped into a carryall that was waiting for her. It was drawn by two mules and a man was driving who—and here is the odd part of it—Aleck thinks was the half-witted mulatto who lives with his mother at the poorhouse."

The other put out a protesting hand as if to ward off a blow:

"You don't imagine——"

"If I do, dear boy, it is only imagination, and as tenuous as vapor. I should probably never have thought of it again but for Aleck's notion about the driver. You and I know of that mulatto. He is the illegitimate child of a poor white woman who lived in the lower part of the county, and was taken into the poorhouse just before her child was born. He must be eighteen years old by now—a strapping fellow, more than able to earn his living and his

mother's, if he were not almost idiotic. No mother would be willing to have him on the place, even as a field-hand. He milks the cows and takes care of the mules and does hauling of various kinds for the poorhouse. But I have never seen him alone on the road. His mother gathers berries in summer, and chincapins and hickory-nuts in the fall, and persimmons in winter, and sells them in the neighborhood—mostly to the negroes. When she has more stuff than she can carry comfortably she takes Bob along to help her. Blankenship ought to be ashamed of himself to send any other woman out with the fellow."

Mr. Rice interrupted him:

"You say there was something familiar in her figure and motion! You did not see her face?"

"I could not have told whether she were white or black. Her veil was thick, and, warm as the weather is, she did not lift it while I was looking at her. Aleck caught a glimpse of her as the veil blew back. She was almost running and climbed into the carryall as if afraid of being spoken to.

"That was another thing that made me suspect—There is no use beating about the bush, Rice! I am afraid that woman was Molly Watkins. If so, this sort of thing must be stopped! Common decency requires it. I shall make it my business to see Blankenship and speak my mind. If she has no shame, we must respect the name that used to be hers.

"I could not sleep until I told you all I know. We are one in opinion and in feeling in this matter."

CHAPTER XII

THE plans for what the Blankenship's "boarder" styled to her host and admirer "a pious spree" were not carried out so easily as she had anticipated. She had won sharp-eyed Betsey to an attitude of indulgent tolerance of her caprices and manœuvres. Rashe was, for most of the time, her obedient vassal. She entertained him immensely and her adroit flatteries were sweet to his coarse taste. Compliance with her whim (she called it "longing") to go to Mount Hor on this particular Sunday involved a departure from established rules that was nearly a breach of law and order as laid down by the overseer.

"Sunday," as he had expounded to the authorities from whom he received this commission, and to whom he rendered account of his stewardship—"warn't no time for the poppers to be traipsin' and stravagin' 'roun' the country, lookin' for fun and mischief. Excep' on the Sundays when thar happens to be preachin' in the po'house, I mean to see that mighty few visitors gets into the grounds, and that every mother's daughter an' every man-jack of the poppers stays at home. 'Tain't noways agreeable for me, gentlemen, as I needn't tell you, to stan' guard all day long when like any other live man I'd like to have a little tech of holiday for myself.

"But duty is duty, and I try to do mine."

Nobody controverted the decree. If he had not laid down the rule, it would have been made by some member of the board of overseers of the poor. "Thieving" and "pauperism" were too nearly synonymous in the minds of respectable folk to be lightly divorced. If the pauper population were free to rove the countryside on the day of rest from toils that kept them out of mischief for six days of the week, pilfering and unlicensed visits to negro "quarters" would become a public menace. Rashe comprehended the situation, and was prepared to meet it. His wages—or as he put it, his salary—had been raised twice within the last ten years. He had many of the qualities of the born executive. Under his sway the farm was worked to the utmost acre, and the garden yielded all the vegetables required for the sustenance of the community of fifty souls. The mules used for field-work and hauling from without were in good condition; the hogs and calves supplied meat for home-consumption, and Mrs. Blankenship's prudent management of poultry-yard and dairy was county talk. Altogether, those best qualified by position and opportunity to judge the case, decided the present overseer of the poor to be the man for the place.

Rashe made no secret of his profound appreciation of the fact in the discussion following Molly Watkins's petition.

"Don't you see, Miss Molly, that I have a character to keep up? It's as well onderstood 'boutcher

as any one of the Ten Comman'ments, that not a livin' cretur goes outside them draw-bars on workin' days without I giv' em leave. An' on a Sunday none of 'em gits that! I'd like to obleege you, as I needn't tell you, an' seein' as how you've set your heart upon this 'ere 'pious spree,' 's you call it, I'd be willin' to strain a p'int or two to please you."

She broke in coaxingly:

"But, my dear Mr. Blankenship, as I understand the case, *you* made the rule and have a perfect right to break it if you like. There's nobody superior to you in office. And I won't ask you for this treat again this summer. I'll keep my veil down all the time, and not even my old beau, little Rice, will recognize me. I'll bet my best pocket-handkerchief—the last one left with lace on—against your dish-cloth, Mrs. Blankenship"—wheeling upon her—"that neither he nor Madam Carrington herself, nor your 'meaching, mealy-mouthed' old maid who means to marry Madam's son, will know me. And think what a story I'll have to tell when I get back! I tell you what will be a capital plan," clapping her hands girlishly. "Your sister lives just a mile this side of the church. I heard you say the other day that you hadn't had a chance to see her for ever so long. We'll leave you there and call for you when the solemn services of the sanctuary"—mouthing it grandiloquently—"are concluded."

It was a master-stroke. Within an hour the carryall—a vehicle that would be called a four-wheeled cart, now—was brought around to the

door of the overseer's quarters with Bob Logan, the three-quarter-witted mulatto, as charioteer.

Rashe had superintended the furnishment of the interior with a thick layer of clean, sweet-smelling straw and a couple of stout rush-bottomed chairs. The driver's seat was an unpainted board laid across the front of the carryall. His long legs hung over it, and his feet rested upon the whiffle-tree. After helping the fair passengers into the vehicle by lowering the hinged dashboard at the back, and guiding them to their respective seats, the gallant host put the finishing-touch of elegance by opening a big green-cotton umbrella and directing his Betsey to "hold it straight an' steady, an' be keerful not to jab Bob's eyes out. Ef you do, one of you ladies will have to drive yourselves home."

The carryall had rumbled out of the draw-barred outer entrance when Mrs. Blankenship was startled by a shriek of hysterical laughter from the veiled figure at her side.

"In the name o' common sense what's took you *now?*" she demanded in her tartest every-day tone and manner. "You pretty nigh skeered me to death!"

The other continued to laugh, swaying from side to side in a paroxysm of mirth.

"Excuse me, please!" she gasped out at last. "But it is all too *excruciatingly* funny!"

The polysyllable stunned Betsey for an instant. Then she rejoined witheringly: "I don't know what to make of you sometimes. If you're goin' inter

highstrikes, maybe we'd better turn 'roun' and go home!"

"*Dear* Mrs. Blankenship! please forgive me! But it is *so* nice to be off on this little frolic with nobody but you, that I am making a fool of myself. I'll behave better now I have had my laugh out."

She kept her word all the way to the house at which her hostess alighted to stay with her sister during Molly's absence in church. When the vehicle returned, the sister, a slatternly older edition of Betsey, came out to the carryall to stare at the person of whom Betsey had gossiped incessantly all the time spent with her relative. She was not content with the partial scrutiny.

"Put up your veil—can't you?" she said impertinently. "Betsey's told me sech funny things 'bout you that I want to see you good."

The poorhouse show-piece obeyed, revealing a sallow complexion, a delicate, sharply defined profile, faded dark eyes that might once have been either brown or black, and thin lips straightened into a caricature of a civil smile:

"You are welcome to a look at what is left of me," she said. "But if what the parson told us this morning be true, you can never see me 'good.' I am the chief of sinners."

The play upon the misused adjective was thrown away upon the listeners, as might have been expected. Betsey made no allusion to it in the account rendered to her husband when she got home:

"I declar' she looked right down ugly! Nobody

would never have believed she was ever as pretty you say she was when she was young. But she spoke real pleasant to Susan Jane, an' said as how she hoped she mought see her agin some time."

"Let her alone for doin' an' sayin' the ladylike thing!" was the confident response. "She's layin' down, restin' now, did you say? She looked pretty nigh tuckered out when she got out of the carryall. I reckon she ain't so strong as she tries to make out. And five mile to church an' five mile back on a July day ain't no joke.

"I'm on tenter-hooks to hear what she'll have to say 'bout her church spree. She's more fun 'n' a circus once she gits started!"

He hung upon the hooks until impatience developed into bad humor. The boarder declined to come down to dinner, pleading a severe headache.

Betsey, ascending to the upper chamber to satisfy herself that the headache was a reality, was moved to what stood with her for feminine pity by the haggard face and heavy eyes.

"I'm afeard she's goin' to be sick," she admitted to her husband. "I'll run up agin presen'ly with a cup of real strong tea, and ef that don't bring her 'round it mought be as well to send Bob for the doctor. 'Twon't never do fer her to die on our han's."

Upon learning that the doctor would be the penalty of refusing to be "brought 'round," the patient swallowed the potion proffered by the nurse

—green tea, stewed to its utmost potency and warranted to bear up an egg. Then she engaged faintly to "try and sleep off the headache."

"I hope to be able to thank you, by and by, for all your goodness," she added, twisting the pale lips into the conventional smile.

What of Betsey's heart had withstood the friction of ten years' oversight of the poorhouse and of the overseer himself answered to the sight of actual suffering, and the recognition, through it all, of her kindly offices. She pinned a blanket-shawl over the window to exclude the sunlight, leaving a space below by which a few breaths of air might enter.

She volunteered to "do all I ken to keep them nasty poppers quiet. 'Tain't sech a' easy job as you mought think of a Sunday evenin'!"

While Rashe enjoyed his nap in the chamber—longer and more profound than on week-days by reason of a lighter load of official care and a heavier load of dinner—his helpmeet made a tour of the premises in fulfilment of her humane purpose.

A row of native oaks had been left to flourish undisturbed by the woodman's axe at the rear of the back yard. Behind these straggled groups of log huts assigned to the colored paupers. One of the overseer's court-rules was that none of these should trespass upon the benches of hewn planks, some of which were made fast to the trunks of the trees, while most of them were portable.

"Ef they owned the place they couldn't ast

nothin' nicer nor what has been pervided for 'em on a hot evenin', after the day's work is done," was an oft-uttered boast of the overseer. "An' it's pretty as a picter to see 'em takin' it easy on moonshiny nights. It allers remin's me of a picter I seen at the the*ay*ter in town oncet."

The turf had been worn from the ground years ago by the tread of hobnailed shoes and bare feet, but Rashe had the hard earth swept every day, and was strict in demanding that his charges of both sexes should "clear up their own litter." There was in force also the unwritten law requiring the inmates to don clean and comparatively whole clothes Sunday.

The dinner was exceptionally good to-day, and it was always the best served in the week. There had been green corn on the cob; new potatoes boiled in their jackets; cymblings and stewed tomatoes; boiled ham and a mammoth chicken-pie. For dessert there was boiled blackberry pudding with hard sauce.

The benches were all occupied as Mrs. Blankenship strode along the line and inculcated the duty of "talkin' low and raisin' no racket on account of Miss Watkins's headache." She could not refrain from subjoining—"she went to church this mornin', and 't seems like it didn't agree with her!"

A dutiful titter ran through the group. Nancy Wilkinson, the oldest resident, had a response ready:

"Maybe 't agreed with her soul, ef 't didn't agree with her body!"

A wider grin upon toothless mouths and a louder cackle of cracked voices proved the hit neat and well-aimed. A low order of wit and the broadest humor found currency in the circle of outcasts. What else could be expected by the most obstinate of optimists if he had taken account of the gang flung together by the fortune which all there would have cursed as "outrageous"?

The women outnumbered the men, as was inevitable in an agricultural community. There were eight nominal widows. Rashe registered them mentally, and in jovial discourse with outsiders, as "five grass and three turf." What was a poor white to do, when her husband ran off to parts unknown after drinking and gambling away every dollar that belonged to him or to her, but take refuge in the one resort left open to her? If she had children too young to be bound out as field-hands or mechanics, they went with her and received the stamp of pauperism, which could never be effaced so long as they remained residents of their native State. Of the eight domesticated for life in the poorhouse, three brought their helpless and hapless offspring with them. Two babies had been born since they were taken under the parental care of the county. The "widows-indeed" from whom the mainstay of bread and the mainstay of water were taken by relentless death were among the most agèd inmates of the refuge.

A singular fact, that may or may not have had significance, was that the women were not content

to remain idle, while, as Rashe lamented wonderingly, the men had to be driven to their work "like so many good-for-nothin' corn-fiel' niggers."

"Ef I was a sure-'nough overseer, I would lay a cowhide over their backs to the tune o' nine-and-thirty, plaguey quick, I can tell you!" he said, again and again, to the board that laughed in his angry face and "reckoned *he* could get work out of them, if anybody could."

He had ways of his own invention for doing this, and the board asked no officious questions so long as he abstained from "personal violence." "If a man will not work, neither shall he eat," was a text that had the devout approval of our disciplinarian. And when to fasting was added confinement to one's cabin, with the threat of cord and handcuffs for the insubordinate, it may be readily imagined that instances of continued recusancy were infrequent.

The women did all the work of the house, including cooking and washing. Yet nearly every one had some lighter art of her own choosing that employed fingers and thoughts in her spare time. Nancy Wilkinson knit socks for babies and boys, and managed to sell them to poor whites and such plantation negroes as hankered after the gayly colored foot-gear. By a system as cunningly devised as that which gained in the Civil War of the next generation the name of "the grape-vine telegraph," customers contrived to make known their wants to the crone who had not budged a dozen steps from the poorhouse in fifteen years.

Sukey Logan, a grass-widow, with two white children and one mulatto, the latter having been born since she was taken into the house, ranged the "old fields" on summer afternoons and gathered great store of partridge eggs. The contents of these were "blown out" through a hole pierced in each end of the eggs and the empty shells were strung like so many monstrous pearls upon stout linen thread. White children bought these barbaric necklaces eagerly. Their elder sisters sometimes painted the shells in water-colors and utilized them as table and parlor decorations. Sukey likewise strung the hard ripe red berries of the "fever-bush," known farther North as "bittersweet," into necklaces and bracelets. The conical nuts of the chincapin were in high request, eaten raw, boiled, or roasted, or when under Sukey's nimble fingers they, too, were strung in long chains or belts. Worn with white frocks they imparted a touch to the attire of young girls that suggested associations of Pocahontas and her attendant forest-nymphs.

It must not be supposed for an instant that the fair purchasers and wearers of these ornaments of native growth and workmanship bought them directly from the maker. When not peddled by white or mulatto children from the poorhouse, or obtained through the "middlemen" of plantation servants, they might be had, but rarely, from Mrs. Blankenship's sister, who acted as agent for those "dreadful old creatures she had to see when she visited Sister Betsey."

Chaney Jones was the daughter of one poor white and the widow of another. They had lived in the county but three years, having come "up the river" from their old home when the husband accepted the place of overseer at Beau Mont, the home of the Wirt Cocke of whom we have heard as a problematical suitor of Beth Moore. The Joneses had two children and the arrival of a third was imminent when the father was drowned crossing the James in a boat one stormy winter night. The Cockes did all that humanity and Christian charity could dictate. The costs of the funeral were defrayed by the late employer, and the family was supported at his expense until spring brought the necessity of installing another overseer in the house occupied by the widow and her three babies. Investigation revealed that she was an orphan and that her husband's family would not or could not contribute a dollar toward her maintenance. It was a case of sheer necessity as the neighborhood agreed, to commit the helpless creatures to the keeping of the county. The conviction was strengthened by the discovery that the widow, who had been ill with inflammatory rheumatism all winter after the birth of her baby, would be lame for life. Her children were bright and healthy, and as the two elder grew in stature and intelligence, Mrs. Blankenship gradually committed to them the whole charge of the crippled mother. When not engaged in this duty they ran wild over garden and fields and grew like cabbages. The eldest was now twelve, the second

ten. The baby, a boy, was seven. Not one of them could read or write.

When the "boarder," who speedily made friends with them, remarked airily upon this deficiency, the mother answered:

"Po' folks has to do without a-many things they would like to have. There ain't no A B C books 'boutcher, ef I had time to learn the chil'ren, and that I *ain't* got! What with makin' an' mendin' their clo'es an' all the sewin' Mrs. Blankenship puts upon me—hemmin' towels an' turnin' sheets an' darnin' blankets an' bedquilts, and what not—I don't get a minnit to myself from mornin' 'tell night."

Dickens had made the American reading world acquainted with the terror the English poor felt for the "workus." Virginians of the better class—and this was largely in excess of the illiterate—kept pace with current literature, and every homestead boasted a library of standard classics that would have done honor to a college. Dickens's inimitable creations were read over and over until Richard Swiveller, Little Nell, and Quilp were actual living personalities to every member of the household. That the model county charity, run ably and gainfully by Rashe and his "capable" spouse, had any features in common with the foreign workhouse never entered the handsomely furnished minds of humane men and tender-hearted, open-handed women.

The overseer's wife took on no airs of superior

station or breeding this afternoon, while chatting in turn with paupers lounging in the shade of the spreading oaks. She was a trusty link joining them to the outer world and never averse to a luncheon of racy gossip.

Sukey Logan, whose son had acted as charioteer to the churchgoers, had a morsel ready when Betsey stopped for a word with her. Bob's mother—odd as it may seem—had not lost caste with her compeers by reason of the misfortune that had overtaken her within a few months after she and her deserted children were given shelter under the hospitable roof-tree.

A French actress, famed and fêted on both sides of the Atlantic, had the playful habit of introducing her son, born out of wedlock, as "*Mon petit accident.*" Sukey Logan knew no language except her own, and very little of that. She was, nevertheless, in full sympathy with the sentiment that inspired the Parisian's *bon mot.* The virtuous matron of whom Rashe spoke, when he recollected her at all, as "My First," had read the sinner lectures, many and tart, upon the iniquity of which she had been guilty. The other four grass-widows set the example of overlooking the indiscretion and receiving the transgressor by merciful degrees back into full and regular fellowship. She lay back in the rocking-chair Bob had presented to her last Christmas, and twirled a turkey-tail fan while discoursing to an audience that closed in about her hungrily as the story gained flavor.

"Bob, he say as how quite a lot o' gentlemen watched Miss Molly when she come out o' church to-day. An' while she was in church too, for that matter. You see, Bob, he stole up to the winder while the preachin' was a-goin' on, and he could see the church folks as plain as if he was inside. Mr. Wirt Cocke was a-settin' right cross the aisle from his dear Beth—like he does every Sunday when he ken—but he had a corner of his eye for the strange lady a-settin' so 'umble-like by the do'. An' Mr. Abe Saunders what's ole enough to know how to behave in church—he was a-twistin' 'roun' all the time like he was settin' on a hot shovel—to ketch a look at her. Bob say the only men thar who looked like they didn't notice her was Mr. Rice and Mr. Carrington. That p'intedly did make me laugh! Folks do say as how Mr. Rice was mighty far gone in love with her befo' she run away. Sech a little snip of a man, too! She could 'a' put him in her pocket! For all that, I happen to know that he was dead in love with her!"

Mrs. Blankenship spoke as one having authority that it was time to use.

"Yes! Dead in love with her! She mought 'a' been the Rev. Mrs. Rice this blessed minnit ef she had 'a' said 'Yes' instid of 'No'!"

An awed silence fell upon the group. The contrast indicated to the imagination of the dullest there took away the power of ready comment upon the amazing intelligence. When Nancy Wilkinson found tongue, her voice quavered and broke:

"An' to think I ken recollec' him a-comin' here to preach when he was young an' han'some, an' as you mought say, the *idle* of the church an' of everybody else!"

She lifted a corner of her checked apron to bleared eyes that were wet.

The overseer's wife capped the object-lesson with a practical homily:

"That makes me say what I *do* say! And that is, that none of us ken tell what we may be comin' to befo' we die. I mind I heerd a circuit-rider by the name of Tompkins say oncet (and he suttinly was a splendid preacher!)— He said: 'We are up, my friends, to-day with the hopper-grass, and down to-morrow with the sparrow-grass!' I mind myself of them solemn words whenever I see a hopper-grass, or stick a knife into a stalk o' sparrer-grass. It's up to-day an' down to-morrer with every single one of us!"

The Widow Wilkinson had regained composure:

"Do you reckon he's ever heerd that she is HERE?" The emphasis upon the last word cannot be expressed by capitals.

"I don't see why not! Mr. Paul Carrington, he come over here nigh upon a month ago, on a-purpose to fin' out ef 'twas her that was said to be in the county po'house, an' he got the truth *straight!* Mr. Rice, he lives at High Hill, right in the house with the Carringtons. 'Tain't noways likely as Paul kep' it to himself. No! they've shook her off for good an' all, now that she's under foot. That's

been the way with rich and wealthy and religious folks from the time the world was made 'till now. Thar's no rubbin' *that out!*"

The subject of gossip and homily did not appear below-stairs until the sun was setting. The Blankenships were sitting in the narrow porch fronting the crimson-and-orange west when she glided out of the door.

"Fine's a fiddle!" ejaculated Rashe, jumping up with outstretched hand. "I'll bet on you every time! Take this cheer!" indicating the roomy rocker swinging noisily upon the uneven boards from the suddenness of his abdication.

"Thank you! but not until I have paid my debt of honor. I lost my bet to-day. Mahlon recognized me although, like the little game rooster he is, he did not show it."

She passed over to the delighted hostess a filmy construction of cambric and lace edging, and sinking into the rocker with languid grace that Rashe said to himself was "for all the world like a queen!" began the recital for which he had waited long:

"He saw me come in. I hoped to get there before him. I forgot that he is a High Hiller now, and that Madam is always one of the very first on guard upon the walls of Zion. He was sitting next to the aisle about the fourth seat from the west door, and looked at me, as I slipped into a seat opposite to the benches railed off for 'our colored brethren.'

"I felt safer near them than in a higher place

in the synagogue. He turned first as red as a beet and then as white as a silver-skin onion, then squared himself about and did not turn his head again during the service. You may be sure I watched him as a cat watches a little white mouse that has got away from her once. I had half a mind, several times, to wait and face him—veil up—when he came out. Then I thought it might make a disturbance and I didn't want to do anything that might be an annoyance to this dear lady"—nodding at Betsey, who was examining her new handkerchief delightedly —"or to you, Mr. Blankenship. I am afraid I have a weakness for scenes. I amused myself all sermon-time with fancies of what would happen if, as soon as the parson said 'Amen!' I were to climb upon the bench and shout: 'Oh, yes! Oh, yes! all of you look and listen! I am Molly Watkins, formerly of Clover Crest, Opecancanough County, now the honored guest of Mr. Horatio Gates Blankenship, overseer of the poor. I was a stranger and he took me in; hungry, and he fed me. Which is more than any of you scribes, pharisees, and hypocrites would have done!' What *do* you think would have happened if I had?"

Rashe was sitting upon the top step and now lost his balance in the tempest of merriment that attacked him. He fairly rolled on the floor, gurgling and screaming, until his wife caught up a tumbler of water and dashed it in his face.

"*Now* maybe you'll come to your senses!" she snapped out. "Of all the fools I ever see, you're

the wust when you let yourself go! *Heish* up! I tell you! or you'll have all the poppers on the place here in another minnit.

"Not but what it was enough to make a dog laugh —the way you did it all!" she conceded when her husband resumed the perpendicular, and only intermittent gasps and snorts told of the recent convulsion. "I could jes' think how they'd all 'a' looked ef you had a-done it. Lordy!" stopping to chuckle. "What *would* stuck-up ole Madam and her Beth Moore 'a' said?"

"They were both there and his high-and-mightiness, her son. But it was natural that I should have been too much taken up with my dear little grain of Rice to pay much attention to them. He is whiter and sleeker than ever. *Wouldn't* I like to attend that missionary meeting at The Glebe next Wednesday? Yet"—in well-affected pensiveness—"I don't think I could bear to see another woman in the place *I might* have had if I had known what was best for me fifteen years ago!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE called meeting of the Ladies' Missionary Society at The Glebe at three o'clock on Wednesday (by order of the president) provided ample proof that the grape-vine telegraph, with the poorhouse as "central," and Bob Logan as main operator, had done lively work since Sunday.

The donation-party is of Yankee origin, and was known to Southern Christians only through domestic and religious talks that drifted across Mason and Dixon's line. If the title (which to my ears always has the eleemosynary twang) were foreign to the Mount Hor parishioners, the genius and spirit of it were interfused in church life as part and parcel of its very existence. The pastor might not claim and collect tithes of the worldly possessions of his flock. A higher law of heart and conscience made it a privilege to keep his table supplied with luxuries he could not afford to purchase, and to see that barns and stable and farmyard were stocked. The habitual exchange of substantial foods and delicacies between neighbors of abundant means which was one of the most beautiful of old Virginia social observances—made any theory of charity untenable. If a lamb were slaughtered at Beau Mont, or High Hill, a choice cut went to The Glebe, as naturally as a

basket of plum-cake was sent with Miss Beth's love to Montrose or Ingleside. All were love-offerings—none donations. No matter how lavish the tokens might be, the pastor was a benefactor—never a pensioner.

Mrs. Winston had been expressly forbidden to make other preparations for the "called meeting" than to lend her house for the afternoon. The simple collation prescribed by the By-laws was in hand before noon. By the time breakfast was over, a procession of messengers on horseback and on foot delivered their burdens at the back door of The Glebe—with the "love" (not compliments) of the respective mistresses, and bore back thanks as affectionate.

The mistress of The Glebe was as notable in housewifery as in church-work, and had deft assistants in Beth Moore, Helen Carrington, and Emily Trueheart from Briarfield. The trio of adjutants had reported for service at eleven o'clock, and partaken at twelve of the "snack" that superseded the family dinner.

Madam Carrington proffered excuses and regrets through Beth. An unexpected visit from her commission merchant, who had run up from town that morning to talk over important business, "detained her from a meeting to which she had looked forward with pleasure."

"Which, being interpreted, means that she will talk for hours about tobacco and corn, when she might be hearing the news from Timbuctoo and

Ceylon!" interpolated Helen, when Beth repeated to Mr. Winston the message at the luncheon-table.

He beamed indulgently upon the rattlepate.

"Tobacco and corn have more to do with missions than you may believe. The spread of the Gospel is largely dependent upon the growth of crops. I think of that when I am asked to pray for rain. But I am sorry the commission merchant took this day for the business call."

As Helen had owned to Mr. Rice, she did not stand in awe of the cloth, and she was entirely at ease with this representative of the profession.

She helped herself to another beaten biscuit and buttered it, preparatory to spreading each bit with peach marmalade.

"Poor grandmother! I can fancy her misgivings between accounts of sales and bargains, as she wonders who will put on the brakes when the wheels of gossip are fairly started. I have great confidence in your executive ability, Mrs. Winston, but you see, grandmother has had more experience with the species of gossip indigenous to this region. I don't know that it is really more hardy and pestiferous than that grown in other latitudes. I may imagine this because I know more about it."

"We will set an example in the work of crushing it out by refusing to believe that our neighbors are worse than others," suggested Mrs. Winston, pleasantly, and changed the subject.

The talk was to recur to her with disagreeable force when one of the first arrivals, Mrs. Scott,

whose estate of Crowndale was within a couple of miles of the poorhouse farm, hardly laid aside her bonnet before breaking forth with:

"Do you suppose it can be true that that horrid woman at the poorhouse who declares she is Molly Watkins actually had the assurance to go to church last Sunday? I have heard it from the very best authority. In fact, my informant told me that when she heard the report on Sunday night she was so wrought up that she drove over to the poorhouse Monday morning, and insisted upon seeing the wretch with her own eyes. And I am grieved to the heart to be obliged to say that there is no doubt as to her identity. My friend knew Molly Watkins well, and this is the very same person! She flew into a passion when Mrs.—my informant—told her that she had altered so much it would be hard to convince people that she was the same girl.

"'Perhaps you would have been the worse for wear, if you had been through purgatory!' she almost screamed. 'Maybe I can tell you a thing or two that may change your mind!' And with that she ran on with a string of stuff about my informant's family and neighbors, and county-scandals that were perfectly shocking but quite true in the main, you know? My informant says that nobody who heard Molly Watkins carry on in the old days could disbelieve her. Ah!" as a majestic figure appeared in the doorway and paid her respects to the hostess, "here is Mrs. Meade now! She may be able to throw some light on the matter!"

"If by the 'matter' you mean the disgraceful story I was telling you yesterday," began the newcomer with a magisterial wave of the hand.

"I have not mentioned your name," interposed the other, deprecatingly.

Another gesture, larger and more comprehensive than the former, closed her mouth.

"I affirm nothing unless I am positive it is true! If any one here needs confirmation of what I told Mrs. Scott, I may mention that two other ladies of unquestioned veracity, after hearing my story, considered it a duty they owed to the community to see for themselves whether I was right or in error. So they went together to that horrible hole! I can think of nothing but 'a sink of iniquity' when I recollect what I myself saw and heard! And the abandoned creature put the finishing touch to her identification by actually stripping off her dress and showing them the initials 'M. W.' tattooed by that dissipated sailor-brother of hers. Everybody heard of the freak at the time. When the ladies exclaimed in horror at seeing it, she laughed like a fiend. 'Seeing is believing—is it?' she said. And she capped the insult by telling them what a fine story they would have to tell at the 'called meeting' to-day. 'I was in church Sunday and heard the notice given. I had thought of going myself just for the fun of it,' she said. 'It would have been a jolly lark. But I am not personally acquainted with the present parson's wife, and I didn't like to intrude. When poor little Naomi Rice was alive,

I used to have the run of The Glebe. She and I were great chums.' "

"They *were!*" assented Mrs. Matthew Harrison who, with half-a-dozen others, had entered while the excited harangue was in full flow, unobserved by any one except the embarrassed hostess. "After hearing all the revolting tales that have been flying about the county since Sunday, I felt that my path of duty was plain. I was the first to try to ascertain the facts of the shocking scandal. And painful as it was, I went to-day again to that—POOL!" pausing to take breath after the bold flight—"and I saw the—Magdalen! for myself! She was in bed, having had some sort of fit, spitting blood and all that, after the visit of the ladies of whom Mrs. Meade was speaking just now. Mrs. Blankenship had put her to bed in her own chamber down-stairs, and I found her there. The Blankenships tried to persuade me not to see her. Whereupon I took the liberty of telling him that, in the opinion of highly respectable people with whom I had talked, he had taken a great deal upon himself in admitting the creature without consulting the Board. He tried to excuse himself by saying that she was not there as a pauper or regular inmate, but as an old friend of his and a visitor.

" 'I ain't never entered her name in the poorhouse books,' he said in his coarse way. 'An' as *I* look at the case, it's no business of the county who stays in my part of the house.' He was very insolent, until I reminded him who I was, and that my sons might have influence with the authorities.

"All this was at the door of my carriage with the servants within hearing. At that, he gave in, and begged my pardon and said something about the Watkinses having been kind to him when he was a poor boy, and all that.

"I answered that the feeling was creditable to him, and that I had no intention of trespassing upon his premises, but I must have the evidence of my own senses as to the truth or falsity of what was going the rounds of the county, and so forth. Well! as I said, I got a look at the woman and am convinced that she is no other than the Molly Watkins who disgraced us all, and broke her father's and mother's hearts by her conduct fifteen years ago. She was lying in bed as I said, with a cap on. A lock of hair had escaped from the cap and lay on the pillow.

"I took hold of it and said: 'Your hair is darker than I thought it was.'

"With that she laughed—and it was Molly Watkins's laugh, and no mistake. 'It used to be light-brown. One of my beaux—little Mahlon Rice it was (I saw him in church Sunday)—called it "golden chestnut." I always said that dark hair ought to go with black eyes. So I had my head shaved—three times. The hair grew in darker every time. It is not as dark yet as I want it to be. And it doesn't matter *now* that Mahlon admires golden chestnut!'"

An audible shudder that was a moan ran around the room. Helen was crying silently upon Beth's shoulder.

Mrs. Winston brought her pencil-case down upon the table with a sharp click:

"Attention, ladies! if you please! We have now more than a quorum present. The meeting will please come to order!"

She was obeyed so far as outward show of order went. The meeting was "opened" by a short prayer, and a brief psalm was read. It was patent that nobody was in a mood for singing, and the president proceeded at once to the business that had called them together. There were grateful acknowledgments from the auxiliary society in Richmond and from the parent organization in New York of contributions in money and clothing and books, and a personal letter to Mrs. Winston to which she invited especial attention. Some societies—the writer, an American woman who had worked for some years in Ceylon, stated—had adopted orphaned or deserted native children, and taken upon themselves the support and education of these forlorn little ones. She named a sum that was an approximate estimate of what each child would cost per annum, until such time as she would be able to earn her own living. Preparation for some specific line of labor was included in the child's education. In other foreign-mission stations this system of adoption had been conducted with most gratifying results.

Mrs. Winston, after the secretary had read the letter, pressed home the project warmly and intelligently. She had thought deeply over, and

prayerfully *of* it, since the receipt of the communication. She had gone so far as to have ready for their consideration a plan she craved leave to submit. They had but lately accepted reluctantly and sorrowfully the resignation of the president of this society, one whose good deeds and virtues were known through all the churches in the State. Nowhere else were these held in such reverence and esteem as in the church in which she and her ancestors had worshipped for many useful years. What more graceful tribute could her coworkers, neighbors, and friends pay to Madam Paulina Carrington than to have a pagan child christened under her name and reared into Christian womanhood by the church of her love?

This was the gist of a ten minutes' talk that brought tears to the eyes of all present. The motion, embodying the plan thus outlined, was made by Mrs. Meade, seconded by Mrs. Harrison, and carried by acclamation.

The secretary was instructed to draft a letter to be submitted to the author of the scheme, and when approved, to be forwarded to the returned missionary with the request that such a Ceylonese child should be selected, and duly registered by the Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society of Mount Hor church in the Presbytery of East Hanover, Virginia.

Molly Watkins was not mentioned again until refreshments were served. Then Mrs. Matthew Harrison took up the broken thread of her narrative:

"She coughed a good deal while talking, and her breath came short. But she rallied as she saw that I was interested.

" 'Do you know that I was as good as engaged to the little minister at one time?' she said, by and by. 'I couldn't help thinking as I looked at him in church last Sunday, how differently things had turned out from what he and Naomi planned. But I wasn't born for that humdrum, goody-goody sort of life. "A short life and a merry one!" was my motto. Well!' and as she began to laugh she choked and raised a mouthful of blood, 'well, Mrs. Harrison,' says she, 'I've had the merry life, and it's likely to be a short one!'

"I saw she was getting exhausted and I came away. But I told the Blankenships that I would send around some wine and beef-tea to-morrow, and advised them to have the doctor without delay. You know Doctor Armistead attends the poor-house patients."

"Isn't he getting pretty old for active practice?" inquired Beth, gravely.

In saying it she squeezed Helen's arm warningly. She felt her stir as if to speak.

"I dare say he is, but the county doesn't allow enough to tempt a younger man. Those Blankenships seem to be kind-hearted and they certainly take much interest in her. It was nice, their bringing her down into their chamber where she is as comfortable as might be expected. He is a rough, uncouth fellow, but it was rather touching, his re-

fusing to put her on the county because she used to take notice of him when he was a barefoot boy. He told me about it on the way out. Altogether, it would make a romantic story, in the right hands."

Paul Carrington paid his second visit to the Blankenship "wing" on Thursday forenoon. Recollecting that the sick woman was now on the first floor, he dismounted at some distance from the house, tied his horse to the branch of a tree, and walked cautiously on the turf until nearly opposite the wing. There he paused on the spot where he and Rashe had their colloquy, and looked about for somebody who could take a message to the proprietor. The window of the chamber was open, and he presently descried Mrs. Blankenship's curl-papers in the triangular space between the curtains. She nodded vehemently, waved her hand, and vanished. In three minutes the burly figure of Rashe hastened around the corner of the house.

"Well! Well! Well!! I suttinly am glad *you* ain't a woman!" he puffed when within hearing.

His face was one broad smile and he had "washed-up" so hurriedly that the pudgy fingers stuck to Paul's ungloved hand.

"So am I!" he said, falling into the host's mood. Gravity was out of the question. "But why are you especially glad to-day, may I ask?"

"Set down! Set down! and I'll tell you!" He pulled a chair from behind the nearest tree and gesticulated to a colored man, shambling across the

yard, to fetch another from the porch. Subsiding into this, he went on:

"'Cause why? I'm clean tired out talkin' to the women what has been streakin' in and out of the place ever sence I was fool enough to let them two (I was about to say 'hussies' but I won't, *this* time!) go to church Sunday. *She*"—jerking an elbow in the direction of the house—"was so almighty sure nobody wouldn't never reconnize her with her veil tight shet down over her chin, that I giv' in. And blamed sorry I've been for it!"

"I was surprised when I heard of it," answered Paul. "But I do not think any one suspected who the person you mean was. Everybody knows Bob Logan, and the gossips jumped to the conclusion that his passenger was from the poorhouse. She did not wait to speak to any one, I think."

"She will have it as how Mr. Rice knowed her through the veil! But as I said to her, 'tain't likely *he* went 'round blabbin' about it ef he did mistrust who she was."

"I can answer for it that he did not even notice her in church, much less suspect that she was any one he had ever seen before."

Paul said it decidedly and with dignity. "I came to-day, Mr. Blankenship, as I came some weeks ago, with a message from my mother.

"She has heard that the daughter of her old friend, Mrs. Watkins, is ill and in need of medical attendance better than she is likely to get from the county physician. She wishes to know just how she is to-

day, and if my mother may send Doctor Graham—her family doctor—to see what can be done for her?"

Rashe shook his head violently, and pursed his lips hard.

"I'm afeered Miss Molly wouldn't hear of it, ef she thought she needed a doctor—an' she says she's ever so much better to-day. She had some sleepin' medicine of her own that she took las' night, an' it done her a heap o' good. She got up 'bout an hour ago, and eat quite a fa'r breakfas' so my wife tells me, and is dressin' now. She suttinly has got grit an' spunk! Ef you had a-heered her carryin' on with that ole turkey-buzzard, Mrs. Matt Harrison, you'd onderstand what I mean. My wife, she says 'twas good as a play. She was listenin' in the po'ch, and pretty nigh died a-laughin' when she took it off to me. But as I was about to say, the fac' is *she* has a notion that Madam Carrington has somethin' aginst her ever sence she was a wild case of a girl. To speak plain, suh, she sez to me, one day, 'Mr. Blankenship!' sez she, a-laughin' fit to kill herself, 'Madam Carrington hates me like the devil hates holy water!' You know her way of talkin'?"

Paul Carrington got up: "On the contrary, my mother was once very much attached to this unfortunate woman, and even now, she would do all in her power to make her comfortable for the sake of her friendship for the mother who died of a broken heart in consequence of her daughter's disgrace.

Moreover, as you know, my mother professes and lives the religion that teaches her to do good to all who need her services. It is not in her nature to 'hate' anybody, and she has only pity for this poor mistaken creature. She will be relieved to hear that your visitor is better. My mother's will holds good to render whatever aid she can to her, should she grow worse. I know, too, that she would have me thank you and Mrs. Blankenship for your great kindness to the daughter of her old friends. Please say as much to Mrs. Blankenship with my regards. Good morning!"

After rendering a brusque report of the interview to his "boarder," prudent Rashe took his wife out to the cow-shed to make sure that they could not be heard by the convalescent in the chamber.

"I jes' couldn't let on to her of them las' things he said," he owned, when he had made a clean breast of what had gone through the thick membrane guarding his sensibilities. "He meant it all too much for me to have fun poked at it. An' *that* she'd do, sure's you're born. She ain't got no respec' for nothin' upon earth nor in heaven!"

CHAPTER XIV

A VAST canopy of sullen gray stretched from horizon to horizon; unresting winds that sobbed above the rain-drenched landscape moaned in the tree-tops and tore screamingly past chimneys and gables; this was what the High Hill family saw and heard through the windows of the breakfast-room one morning ten days after Paul's second visit to the poorhouse.

"The August storm is sure to come," said Madam Carrington, taking her seat behind the coffee-urn. "This year it is early in the month. It will hold on for twenty-four hours. The thermometer has fallen ten degrees since bedtime last night. We shall not have clear weather while the cold continues."

Madam was the acknowledged meteorologist of the community. Her weather prophecies were accepted without demur by her household. A lively fire of lightwood knots leaped up the chimney behind her chair. One had been kindled in the chamber at sunrise and swiftly tempered the damp chilliness of the drawing-room in which Helen would practise all the forenoon upon a supply of new music just received from town.

The leaden-gray curtain was without a rift, and

the rain drove steadily against the office-windows when Paul Carrington and Mr. Rice settled themselves for a comforting after-dinner smoke. A bed of scarlet coals told that a fire had burned all day in the deep fireplace below a superstructure of seasoned hickory logs. The room was spacious, and the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with the finest library in any private house for a hundred miles around. A broad desk with a background of pigeonholes was near the western window; the centre-table with the reading-lamp and burden of loose papers had been rolled to one side to make room for two armchairs set directly in front of the fire.

The master of the cosey retreat produced a couple of dressing-gowns from a closet and handed one to his guest:

"Might as well be comfortable indoors! This is a day after my own heart. Cowper and I are at one there! But in place of the 'cup that cheers but not inebriates,' give me a homely Powhatan pipe and Virginia-grown-and-cured tobacco."

He stood with one hand on the back of his chair, surveying with undisguised approval the tall figure at the other end of the rug, as Paul drew the crimson folds of the gown over his chest and tied the cord about his waist.

"You are what Mammy Tina calls a 'sportly figger of a man,'" broke from the host, impulsively. "And never in better shape than now. Your mother and I agreed upon that point in a talk I had with

her last night. You are emphatically her 'strong staff and beautiful rod.'"

"God bless you for saying it! I ought to be looking my best! Congratulate me, Rice! There is not a happier man upon the broad earth than I am to-day!"

Had they been two women they would have fallen upon each other's necks with kisses and tears to do duty for words that would not come. As it was, the older man swallowed hard before he could say:

"Congratulate you! With my whole heart and soul! I have hoped and prayed for this hour these many, many years. I read the blessèd truth in your face and in hers the instant I saw you come into the dining-room together. It was all I could do to hold my tongue and say grace instead of returning thanks. And it is all right, then—at last! Sit down and let me take in the glad tidings like a man! I could cry like a baby out of sheer happiness."

Paul wrung both of the speaker's hands, his own lips trembling and his voice unsteady.

"I believe every word you say, and thank you more than I can ever express. This is the closing chapter of a long, dark story. Heaven grant that the life now opening to us may bring forgetfulness of that bitter, bitter past! Sit down, light your pipe, and let me think for a little while."

Both pipes were filled and lighted, and the two men sat for a long while staring into the fire. The rain lashed the panes and the wind cried shrilly

in the throat of the chimney. The pair might have been the only living creatures in their world of thought and action.

Paul spoke at last. For a few minutes, his articulation was deliberate, and the forced calmness of manner and accent reminded the listener of a strong rein drawn upon a restive horse.

"Yes! a bitter past that seemed, in the living of it, an eternity! I have never opened my lips to you, Rice, with regard to what you have now a right to know—you, the truest friend that ever man had! It has trembled upon my lips a thousand times when all the waves and billows of fate went over me."

He reached over the hearth for the poker and dealt the uppermost log a blow that shook the pile down to the scarlet base. Then he set the iron rod back in its place.

"In order to make you comprehend the worst of the tragedy, I must go back twenty years. I will get over the most shameful parts of it as fast as I can. But two other people alive know what I am going to confide to you—my mother and Beth. God bless them both! He never made other women like them."

Mr. Rice nodded. "You are right! Take your time, dear boy, and tell what you have to say in your own way."

Paul leaned back with locked hands and set features, still gazing into the fire. As he went on, he spoke rapidly for a while, then seemed to get himself in hand:

"I need not tell you that I was, in some sort, a spoiled favorite of fortune from my youth up. You know what I was when I set forth—as I said, gayly—'to seek my fortune.' The estate owned land in Baton Rouge and stocks in New Orleans. My mother sent me South to look after them. The Larues had a plantation in Baton Rouge, and spent their winters in New Orleans. The head of the family was a brother (married to his cousin); there were two children, and his sister. I fell madly in love with her. She was a revelation of womanhood to me. You know what types I had seen all my life. Refined, well-educated, and well-bred, 'gentlewomen' in the best sense of the word. I had met, while in college and university, a few of what were alluded to regretfully by their elders as 'rather wild girls.' They never attracted me, nor, for that matter, did the decorous 'pattern' damsels who had the stamp of 'eligible' from social censors. I had never fancied myself in love, even as a schoolboy. I had my dreams and I meant to hold myself heart-whole until these were realized. You know what marvellous powers of fascination the woman possessed whom I brought home as my wife after six weeks' acquaintanceship. It is unnecessary, too, for me to remind you of her career in this churchgoing, patrician neighborhood. She swept across the county heavens like a comet."

The other raised a warning hand.

"Don't trouble yourself to dwell upon that, dear fellow! *I* know!"

"Yes! and to your cost! She had a host of ad-

mirers and some imitators. Let that pass! My mad dream was broken by the discovery forced upon me before six months had passed, that she had married me to secure permanently what she held in her brother's house, by the grace of her sister-in-law—luxury, all the appurtenances of wealth—a life of pleasure and excitement—all the money she wanted, and social triumphs and conquests. Her pursuits and aims I had been brought up to regard as ignoble and debasing, and beneath the dignity of the highest order of woman. My mother was my standard. You know, too, that Cécile hated her at sight, and that there was, so far as she could wage it, war to the knife between the two. She flaunted her 'devotion' to a church for which she really cared less than nothing, because it irked my mother. When I remonstrated with her on this account and begged her to try to recognize the qualities that made my mother beloved and revered by all who knew her, she laughed in my face. When I persisted and besought her for the sake of her love for me to overcome her dislike for the woman who also loved me, she flew into a violent rage and the truth rolled out like a torrent of lava. I learned then why she had angled for me and how great was her chagrin at finding that—as she put it—'whereas she had expected to be the lady of the manor in an aristocratic Virginia neighborhood, she was the wife of a petty squire, who was the slave of his mother!' But there are things I cannot talk of even yet, and to you!"

He got up and strode to the window. The wailing wind and pelting floods of rain had it all to themselves again.

Mahlon Rice followed his friend, presently, and laid an affectionate hand upon his arm:

"Paul! dear, *dear* friend! Let me take all the rest for granted! You must understand that I can guess at what you cannot—and ought not to force yourself to say! You are out of troubled waters now! Think of that!"

The other turned sharply: "Do you think I could be telling you all this—or any part of it—but for that thought! But you are mistaken in fancying that you know all, or even have a suspicion of the worst of the horrible blunder I have made of my life. Listen! No!" in answer to an energetic gesture of dissent and entreaty. "You *must* hear me through! I will cut it as short as I can. Come back to the fire! I can talk more freely when you do not look at me. Listen! You recollect that I was summoned to Louisiana by the news that my wife was very ill. When I got to New Orleans her brother met me with the intelligence that she had died six days before at Baton Rouge. He had brought the body down to the city in a sealed casket to await my arrival, supposing that I would wish to have it interred in the family burying-ground. He was prepared to accompany me. He took charge of everything—including my dazed, miserable self. His kindness to me throughout the awfully tedious journey was beyond praise. But for this and the

tactful vigilance that anticipated every possible exigency, I think I should have gone entirely mad.

"You recollect that he stayed at High Hill for two days after the funeral, and won universal respect and liking by his evident devotion to me and deep sympathy with me in our common loss?

"You may *not* recall that a week after he left us there came a letter from him asking me to meet him in Richmond where he 'had been detained by unexpected business affairs.' I went at once."

He pushed his chair back and took a few hurried turns from end to end of the room, head down and hands clenched behind him. Coming behind his friend, he pressed him back into his chair and held him thus while he rushed on:

"Rice! his sister was not dead! She had eloped with a fabulously rich West Indian planter and sailed for his home in Havana. 'To save the honor and good name of both families,' the brother had gone through the hellish farce of the loaded coffin, bribing his few confederates heavily to secure their silence. He added particulars which I will spare you. I was to join in the revolting plot—or the name of Carrington would be the laughing-stock of county and State and country for all time.

"I sprang at his throat and would have killed him on the spot if he had not been on his guard. We wrestled for a mad minute. Then he threw me down upon his bed and pinned me fast with his powerful hands—for he was bigger and stronger than I—and told me 'not to be a damned fool, but

to listen to reason. The honor of his family as well as of mine was at stake.'

"He would not leave me all that night. I could see that he feared I would take my life if I were not watched. I spent the night in *hell!* I should have gone utterly mad but for the thought of my mother. I verily believed for some hours that I was really in the fiery pit, and that all that kept me from destruction was the sight of her dear face looking down at me over the edge of the inferno.

"Well! next morning we concluded a compact, sworn to by each of us. The grinning fiend brought a Bible for me to take my oath upon, and took a crucifix from his pocket for his own use. I was to pay him a thousand dollars a year for five years, and he, on his part, engaged that not an inkling of the truth should ever get abroad.

"Then I came back to my mother!"

He was pacing the floor again, and talked fast.

"To the noble woman whom I was to deceive every hour of the rest of a life that was to be one long living lie!

"Kneeling by her, my head in her arms, as she had comforted me when a naughty or grieving child, I swore a silent solemn oath to devote every energy of mind and body henceforward to her service. I would be her slave, her vassal—whatever she might will—to my last breath—so help me, God!

"Mahlon!" stopping abruptly, he dropped into his chair and leaned forward for a closer look into the blanched face and misted eyes. "Can you con-

ceive what these last years of purgatorial discipline have been to a man with red blood in his veins, and a heart that craves a pure love the more hungrily because of the unutterable torments of wrecked hopes and betrayed affection? And when he had continually before his eyes the embodiment of all that he has dreamed of and pined for in womanly virtues and graces? While he dare not indulge for one second the thought of winning her for his own? God is my witness that never, in my least guarded moments of passionate regret, did I allow a hint of what I endured to escape me in glance or word. She was as truly out of my reach as if she were in heaven and I upon earth. My mother's fondest dream ever since my college days was that the two beings dearest to her should be united. She never intimated this to me, but I felt it instinctively, and suffered the more keenly for the consciousness. Then"—clapping Mahlon's knee emphatically—"are you listening, old fellow? Here is the most marvellous part of what is assuredly a more improbable tale than any begotten in the brain of a romance writer. Do you recollect the day, two months ago, when Helen begged me for the outside of a foreign letter, and I refused it? One day when Mr. Winston dined with us?

"I carried the foreign letter to my room and, after rereading it, fell upon my knees in such ecstasy of thanksgiving as Christian may have felt when the burden rolled from his shoulders to the foot of the cross.

"For the letter was from the American Consul at Genoa, whom I had known in the university twenty-odd years back. It informed me that Mrs. Jules Dupont, an American lady who had wintered in Italy, had died and been buried in the section of a cemetery set apart for tourists from foreign countries. Another American woman, with whom the deceased had lived, had sent for him and asked him to write to me of her friend's death. She stated that 'there was some connection by marriage between the deceased and my family, and that she had reason to believe I would be interested in hearing the particulars of the sad event.'

"An Italian physician's certificate of the death was enclosed—a certified copy forwarded, said the consul, that there might be no uncertainty respecting place, dates, etc. In spite of the official tone and wording, the letter was kind and a postscript mentioned the consul's 'pleasant recollection of his former classmate.'

"There was not a shade of doubt as to the authenticity of the document. 'Mrs. Jules Dupont' was the name under which Cécile had lived and travelled since her elopement with the rich West Indian.

"After all this long-drawn-out agony of death-in-life, I was once more fully alive and a free man! Do you wonder that I have walked upon air for the last two months?

"Mahlon! dear friend! what is it?"

The little minister was crouched together in his

chair, his face buried in his hands, his whole frame heaving with emotion. An effort to speak was a mere babble of delight, a conflict of laughter and joyful tears that would have been absurd if it had not been exquisitely pathetic to the beholder. Looking down at the quivering form, Paul made as though he would gather him in his arms, then brushed away drops from his own eyelids and spoke cheerily:

"Thank you for caring so much, dear old boy! We've lived and suffered together for a long time. Please God, the dawn of the new day is here.

"I could not have said all this to another creature —certainly not to any other man. I told my mother the facts contained in the consul's letter. Until then I had never let her into the shameful secret of the mock death and burial. You comprehend, now, why there was never a tombstone put up until lately. My mother urged the propriety of erecting one, again and again. There were other things that puzzled her. Chance twice brought to her knowledge of checks I was transmitting to Larue. She never interferes in my private affairs, but she could not have given stronger evidence of her trust in me than when she refrained from asking a solution of these puzzles. You may imagine what a heavenly relief it was to make a clean breast of everything relating to the foul mystery that, if made public, would have besmirched an honorable name for all time. It is the *dirtiest* page in our family history."

"Tear it out of your memory!" advised Mr. Rice crisply. "And get out a new edition of your biography. You couldn't have a better collaborator. I take it you have kept nothing from *her?*"

"What do you take me for? I was far more frank with her than with my mother. I could not meet her pure eyes and keep anything back. Nor could I set out on my journey to-morrow without telling her of my feelings and hopes. Patient waiting has its limits. I shall tell the news to Helen to-morrow morning. I would tell her to-night, but she would not sleep a wink, dear child, for happiness! She will never know how certain tricks of speech and manner and temper stab me to the heart. Beth has more influence over her than anybody else, and, we may be sure, it will be exerted in the wisest way."

The talk had subsided healthfully into normal channels. The early dusk pressed against the streaming window-panes, but the hickory was all aglow and the ruddy flames drove the shadows out of the farthest corners of the room. Both men puffed away at refilled pipes and hearkened silently to the vain buffeting of the August storm against stout walls and rattling sashes. Hour and environment were peculiarly favorable for the exchange of confidences neither of them would have given freely at another time. In a quarter-century of congenial companionship, they had never drawn so close together before. And, as must be when friendship is without the alloy of selfish reserves and prudential second thought, the silence that ensued upon the

extraordinary narration was as eloquent as the most impassioned utterance could have been to either of the two.

When at last Paul spoke, it was slowly and musingly, as if in self-communion:

"Only the God she has served all her life long with singleness of devotion no saint ever surpassed knows what my mother is—what she has done and borne—and *forgiven!* Her marriage to my father was a love-match on both sides. He was sweet-natured, courteous, and studious. He had succeeded to a large estate which he was utterly incapable of managing. My mother is systematic, energetic, industrious—in short, just the one to step into the place he could not fill. Ask any business man in the county, or in Richmond, what he thinks of her, as planter and financier, and you will get the same story from all. Oh! I have heard the impertinent talk about 'etcetera'! Who has not? My father would have had spirit enough to knock the man down who dared repeat it to him. He loved and honored the wife who saved the patrimonial estate from ruin and himself from bankruptcy. Before I entered college he opened his heart to me upon this subject. He knew his weaknesses and her abounding strength. She never showed herself more worthy of his adoration than by her love for him. When she could ignore his shortcomings, she did it tactfully and cleverly. When she had to throw herself into the breach made by his lack of administrative and executive ability, it was done promptly

and effectively. He told me how gratefully he appreciated it all, and how deep was his reverence for her. In reminding me what heavy responsibilities would devolve upon me, her only son—he commended her, first of all, to me as a sacred trust. If I had not been trained from babyhood to regard my father as the very best of men, he would have taken the highest place in my esteem from the hour of that confidential talk. It was in this very room, by the way, and on a rainy day—" the son broke off to say, with a half-laugh. "Nor was that the only conference we held together here. I was never afraid to bring to him my boyish troubles and scrapes. His counsel was sound, his sympathy unfailing. *He* never punished me! I do not forget that. The duty may not have been more tolerable to my mother than to him. She was made of firmer fibre. That was all! I ought to have been a better man with such examples before me. And, like the weak passionate fool I was, I made shipwreck of my happiness, and would have blasted hers had she been like any other woman ever created. She stood by me through it all.

"There were terrible scenes sometimes!" shudderingly. "She kept her temper under the fire that must have burned to her heart's core. She never talked to me of these scenes afterward. In all the period I write down in memory as the dark age of my life, she did not once speak harshly of the one who had brought discord and turmoil into our peaceful, prosperous life. When I laid before her

the amazing revelation of the sequel contained in the consul's letter, her first words were: 'The Father of us all is very merciful. We will hope that His love found *her* out at the last.'

"You don't need to be told that my mother is absolutely truthful. When she said this she meant every word of it. Cant and sanctimoniousness are words not to be found in her dictionary."

"Don't waste time and breath upon useless information!" interposed Mr. Rice dryly. "Helen calls this room 'the confessional,' and you say it earned the title long before she was born. How short the days are growing! And the August storm abridges this one by an hour."

He stirred the fire to a livelier blaze, and put on two more logs. "If the weather is as bad to-morrow, must you go all the same?"

"I ought not to delay the trip a day longer. The roads will be heavy for perhaps a week to come. But the stage will run regularly. If I do not take it to-morrow, that will mean a postponement of two days. I have business in New York that must be looked into. Then, there is this offer for those lots in Cincinnati. Beth's guardian invested some of her money in Ohio lands, which the city has overtaken at last. The prospects are fair that she may get back the sums disbursed in all these years for taxes, and pocket a tidy sum besides. I have attended to these matters for her since the death of her guardian. There is the more reason, now, for me to see that she is not cheated."

He said it with a happy little laugh, and held his watch down to the fire-glare:

"We must be going in soon. Supper will be ready in half an hour. Let me try again to thank you for the patient attention you have lent to my long and painful story. These two hours in the confessional have been good for my heart, and I hope for my soul. From this moment I obey your advice and begin a new edition of my biography. I would throw away the old but for the priceless memories of mother-love and such loyal friendship as is granted few men. I shall carry them to the grave and beyond."

CHAPTER XV

'There's nae luck aboot th' house,
There's nae luck at a',
There's nae luck aboot the house
Now the gude mon's awa'!'"

crooned Helen Carrington, two days after her father's departure, mounting the porch-steps to the corner where her grandmother and Beth were seated.

Her face was as dolorous as her chant, and she carried in her hand a ball of yellow fluff. It lay prone and stiff upon her palm as she exhibited it.

"Died of the pip!" she went on, dramatically. "No! auntie! it is *not* a Dorking. But now the plague has crept into the poultry-yard, there is no telling how soon every darling Dorkingite may be down with it. Grandmother's August storm has broken five buds on my Oriental pearl rose-bush and drowned, or pelted to death, one of the second brood of baby-ducks. That seems funny enough! But it was a Muscovy, and Mammy Tina is tearing her turban over—'What good eatin' them mouse-covies suttinly does make, come winter!' One of the piano-keys is dumb—and we'll have to send to town for a man to set it going again.

"I know just how the man felt who

"'Stood beneath a hollow tree,
The blast it hollow blew,
And thought of all the hollow world
And all its hollow crew.'

"Don't try to reason with me that the chapter of accidents has nothing to do with father's going away. I know better!"

"We *might* make maple-sugar candy!" quoted Beth demurely.

"And we might have a military funeral for the defunct chicken!" with a disdainful grimace. "Instead of either, I am going to ride to the court-house with our grave and reverend and always delightful chaplain. He invited me just now in the Dorking *salle-à manger*. I have just time to get into my riding toggery. *Au revoir!*"

She ran off, singing, and the clear carolling continued to float down the stairs and through the windows. Now, it was the rollicking air that went so naturally with her swift movements that she fell into it involuntarily when making ready for what she named aptly "a jolly lark":

"'Fly to the desert, fly with me!'"

The last verse was warbled as she presented herself again below-stairs:

"'But if for me thou dost forsake
Some other maid, and rudely break
Her worshipped image from its base
To give to me the ruined place—
Then fare thee well! I'd rather make
My bower upon some icy lake,
When thawing suns begin to shine,
Than trust to love so false as thine!'"

"Did it ever occur to you," Madam Carrington lifted a face as bright as the day as she spoke, "that the Arabian lovers had never seen, or so much as heard of, 'an icy lake'? There are no ice-ponds in the desert."

"Poetical license!" commented Mr. Rice, who stood, awaiting his fair companion, whip and hat in hand. "The wind and sun of yesterday have made the roads quite tolerable, so Joe tells me. It would be a shame to get the new 'toggery' muddy!"

The dark-green cloth habit and cap to match became the wearer well. Her cheeks were flushed like damask roses; her eyes shone like stars. The two women who loved her exchanged glances that said this and more.

"We will go around to the front porch and see you off!" proposed the grandmother, laying aside her knitting.

Two stable-boys held the horses at the foot of the steps. Helen kissed her grandmother, then wrapped Beth in a tight embrace.

"Good-by, darling little *mother!* Yes! I mean to say it when there are only ourselves by! Mr. Rice is one of us!"

She was in the saddle and cantering down the avenue before Beth found voice and composure. Madam put her arm about the slender form.

"That is as it should be! And very soon, please God, she may take the name into constant use!"

They stood, watching the riders until they gained the outer gate. It was a quarter-mile away, but

the air was crystalline clear after the storm, and they saw distinctly the farewell wave of Helen's whip, brandished high above her head.

"She is very happy!" Madam said, as they returned to the vine-curtained nook. "I knew how it would be. We are all unspeakably grateful to you, dear child!"

"To *me?* For what?" The ejaculation escaped Beth's lips before she had time to take in the full meaning of the words. Then, her blush was as vivid as Helen's might have been, and she was dumb.

Madam drew her closer to her.

"We hope to show you why in the days to come. What a perfect day! And what a beautiful world! Mother Nature is making up to us for the August storm. Every flower that could open is blooming, and every bird that has any pretension to a voice is singing."

They sat, without speaking or moving for a while, their senses drinking in the influences of scene and atmosphere.

Mr. Rice had once said that the High Hill homestead always reminded him of a queen sitting upon her throne like a "lady among kingdoms." It overlooked the countryside for miles in every direction, and there was not a blot in the picture this morning. The mistress of the goodly domain spoke again in the pure contralto age and sorrow had not thinned or sharpened:

"Old Simeon's '*Nunc Dimittis*' is continually

in my heart, and trembling upon my tongue. I never imagined that I could be so entirely contented on this side of eternity. If I were asked this hour what other blessing I could desire, I could not name one. The waiting-time was long. I used to cry out in the night-time: 'Oh, Lord, how long? How long?' He has rendered to me double for all the pain, the losses, the shame, and the horror."

Beth's soft hand stole into hers.

"Dear mother! we will try to help you forget it all. Our faces are set toward the future. Did you notice that Helen looked like her father as she kissed us 'good-by' just now? I have seen the resemblance often lately. I think it will grow upon her with time. With all her girlish rattle she has her father's sound sense and incorruptible principles. The foundation of her character is all right. And she is the life of the old house."

"That foundation has been the mainstay of my hopes for her when she has reminded me *horribly* of her mother. I mean all that the word implies. Daughter! in all my long and eventful life I have never been so unhappy as to be brought into intimate association with another being who might be described truthfully as a 'thoroughpaced adventuress.' It is a hard saying, I know!"—for Beth had exclaimed in deprecation or entreaty—"a hard saying, but true, through and through. It is but natural that I should have fearful misgivings when I see anything of the mother repeated in the child. I am thankful that with all my belief in blood and ances-

tral influences, my faith in the redeeming powers of breeding and early education is stronger. The dear Lord, in wisdom and mercy, ordained that you should be given the chance to counteract the workings of the evil inheritance. You have been really the child's mother all her life. I thank God that you are to be her mother in name as well. I say again, and reverently—that the world does not hold to-day a woman who has more cause for devout thankfulness than myself."

Beth's head sank upon the hand closed within hers on the arm of Madam's chair.

"I can say the same for myself—and from my very soul!" she murmured. "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!* And this latest gift is the crown of it all!"

The echo of the thanksgiving was still in the air when Tom loomed into view at the bottom of the steps:

"Ef you please, mistis, Doctor Graham is comin' down de road. Shall I bring him outcher?"

Madam rolled up her knitting and put it into the basket on the stand beside her.

"Certainly, Tom. Bring him here at once."

Brisk footfalls rang upon the porch-floor and the ladies stepped forward to greet a man of forty-five, alert and fresh-colored, with lively eyes and a shrewd, kindly expression. He was clean-shaven except for a pair of neatly trimmed mutton-chop whiskers, and in apparel was just what the popular country doctor of the day should be. Black frock-

coat, white pantaloons, waistcoat, and cravat, were impeccable in quality, cut, and cleanliness.

" 'Looks as if he had stepped out of a bandbox,' did you say?" Helen had retorted upon a girl friend at the Carters' party. "You mean a tailor's show-case. He would have been creased somewhere in packing him into the bandbox. I could show you his double in a window in Chestnut Street, Philadelphia."

Madam Carrington had silenced a man who spoke of her physician as "dandified," by observing quietly that he was "as neat inside as out, and that a doctor could not be too careful as to personal cleanliness. She had known of some who conveyed contagious diseases in their clothing and hair."

Scientific journals were just beginning to hint at the "germ theory," and Madam had never heard of it. Common sense and womanly instinct made her wiser than her age.

"I have come straight from the poorhouse," the physician stated when the preliminary courtesies were over. "In compliance with your wishes I have informed the overseer that the physician employed by the county to visit the paupers has no jurisdiction over a patient in a private family such as his own. I found him entirely amenable to reason. Indeed, he was glad of an opportunity to express his uneasiness at the patient's condition and his dissatisfaction at her progress, or rather, want of progress, under the care of the only doctor who had

seen her. To be brief—I found matters far more serious than I had expected. The person who calls herself 'Mary Watkins' (and I believe truthfully) is critically, if not hopelessly, ill. I doubt if she can live a week under existing conditions. The Blankenships are kind in their way, although, to speak openly, I can see that the wife is very 'tired of the whole business.' That was the way she put it to me. The patient is more troublesome as she loses strength, and irritable at times. When her mind wanders, as it does with the rise of fever that never quite leaves her, she is unreasonable and exacting. Now that she is confined to her bed—and *such* a bed!—a mountain of musty feathers and coarse cotton sheets!—she requires more care than Mrs. Blankenship can spare time to give her, and she objects violently to having the pauper women wait upon her. She told me that 'they poison the air, and their hands are filthy.' Moreover—and this is the worst feature of the case!—she has been for years addicted to the use of opium. She brought a quantity of the drug with her. The overseer says she can't sleep without what he calls her 'sleeping medicine.' The truth is, that she is continually under the influence of the opiate, more or less. For twelve hours past she has lain for most of the time in what we know as a 'comatose state,' induced partly, no doubt, by the drug, but it also indicates a gradual failing of bodily and mental forces. She can never get well. That is beyond dispute. She has led a hard life"—glancing furtively at Beth, and

picking his phraseology gingerly—"and is paying the penalty. Without going into particulars, my dear Madam, you may take my word for that. Her vitality, which was extraordinary originally, is utterly exhausted. If she had no disease, she could not rally. There is nothing left to build convalescence upon. You asked me to make a thorough examination of the case, and to render a candid report to you. I have done it. You may, of course, call in a consulting physician. His verdict could not differ from mine. The case is beyond the reach of human skill."

Madam Carrington seemed to turn to stone as she listened. Her face was bloodless; her voice, when she had cleared her throat to make way for it, was strained and hollow.

"Doctor Graham! this is the most awful thing I ever heard! It cannot go on, if I have to go to that place and nurse her myself! My son brought no such report. Why, doctor, her mother was my schoolmate and lifelong neighbor, and this girl used to play with my children and attended our church! Would it be possible to move her? Could you arrange to have her brought to my house? Would it hasten the end? What have we been thinking of all this time? I never dreamed that she was dangerously ill! What can we do for her at once? We must not lose a minute!"

"Compose yourself, my dear Madam, I entreat you! Let me think! The idea of removal never occurred to me."

He stroked his whiskers meditatively and peered into the depths of the matted vines. Madam sat perfectly still, her gaze riveted upon his face, her knuckles whitening under the clutch of the fingers. The clear pallor of Beth's complexion and the mute horror of her eyes betokened complete sympathy with her friend's anguish.

"Do I understand then," began the doctor slowly, as if dubious of his ground, "that you really wish to bring the patient to High Hill? To be cared for until the end comes? It cannot be far off, you know. It would be possible to construct a sort of stretcher and fit it diagonally into a large carriage."

Madam caught him up: "Mine? Yes, I can see how that may be. I brought Mr. Rice from The Glebe in that way. Go on, please! Can it be done in the present case? There are boards in the carpenter's shop and he can put them together in any shape you wish. I will send pillows and comfortables—everything necessary, if you will give the orders. I will put a boy on horseback and let him take a letter from you to Blankenship, with directions for getting the poor girl ready. It is now ten o'clock. You will stay here to dinner, doctor, and we can set out by two."

She was on her feet and rang the stable-bell attached to the far end of the porch and connected by a long wire with the wall behind her chair.

The clang awoke the doctor from partial stupefaction. He had heard much of Madam's ready

expedients and strenuous measures, but this threw his wits off their balance.

"Stay, my dear lady!" he managed to articulate when she had bidden the groom who came running to obey the imperative summons—"Send John Marsh here, directly! Let him drop everything and come!"

John Marsh was the head carpenter of the plantation, as the doctor knew.

"My dear lady" was not to be stayed by him or any other man, unless it were her son, and he was far away. Not once did she lose her head in the interim that elapsed before the doctor recovered his. By the time he had accompanied the carpenter to the shop, selected boards and issued explicit orders as to fashioning them into a sort of litter, his brain had steadied sufficiently to justify a second remonstrance. Madam Carrington might send for the patient. He would escort the carriage to the poorhouse, superintend the removal of the comatose woman to her new quarters, and install her therein. It was worse than needless for the hostess to subject herself to the fatigue and responsibility of the five-mile drive to the almshouse and then back. It would be far more prudent to send a trusty maid. He poured all this into the ears of Beth, who met him in the porch, grave and self-possessed. She heard him silently to the end of his protest. Then she said quietly:

"You are altogether right, doctor. I am going in her place. My own maid, who is young and strong

and a good nurse, goes with me. She will be useful in many ways. Mr. Rice has come home. He will ride with you."

"I had not thought it was in her," the doctor observed to his companion pedestrian, *en route.* "No bluster or excitement, but she had every detail arranged. I confess to some curiosity to know how she prevailed upon Madam Carrington to change her mind."

"Elizabeth Moore has much quiet force of character," was the response, "and influence with her aunt. She gently reminded her that one of them must superintend arrangements to be made at home for the comfort of the invalid, and that the mistress of the house is the only person who can do this. She succumbed, as was sensible and right."

The disposition of the improvised stretcher in the carriage, roomy as the conveyance was, left but one corner vacant in which an attendant could sit. The stretcher was padded with pillows and comfortables, and more pillows and coverings were heaped about it. Mimy, Beth's maid, very solemn in the appreciation of the dignity thrust upon her, sat upon the box with the driver. Helen had made an opportunity to volunteer a pledge to Beth to be at her grandmother's beck and call, every minute of the afternoon. She went about the simple duties that fell to her with chastened soberness, infinitely sweet and becoming. The announcement of the expedition and its object had astounded her and amazed Mr. Rice.

It was significant of the thorough understanding on the part of mother and son that, after the first shock of the tidings of Molly Watkins's arrival at the poorhouse had passed, there was no avoidance of her name in their confidential talks, or in the family. It was yet more significant that Beth allowed the doctor to invite the minister to join him and thanked them both for the arrangement.

"An early dream and dead!" Mahlon had said to Paul. "What I loved was a figment of fancy. I mourn the delusion—not the object of it. An old, old story! Who said: 'It is not so much a broken heart you have to grieve over as a broken dream'?"

Beth recalled the saying as the carriage rolled out of the gate on its mournful mission. He was cured, and so completely that he accepted the office assigned to him as he might have answered the call to visit a sick parishioner. She watched him for a little while, the benign face lighted by a smile, now and then, as his companion led the talk into more cheerful topics than that which had engaged their thoughts for the last hour or two. She was at ease with regard to him as she leaned back in her corner and indulged in meditations more to her liking.

CHAPTER XVI

An ex-President of the United States—a Virginian by birth and residence—failed to please his neighbors and constituents in certain acts of his administration. Upon his return home the malcontents hit upon what they fancied would be a token of disfavor, yet be so cleverly disguised under the mask of an honorable appointment that he could not resent it.

He was, therefore, made "road-master" of the county, an office which authorized the holder to call out gangs of colored laborers from the adjacent plantations, at his discretion, to mend and make highways. He accepted the office graciously, thanking his fellow citizens for the fresh evidence of their esteem, and forthwith proceeded to provide the county with the best roads in the commonwealth. To accomplish this end he levied upon plantation field-hands at whatever time and season he chose to make the demand, without regard to planting, weeding, or harvesting. "His business was to make good roads," he represented to the indignant planters. "When the highways required repairs, the public weal took precedence of personal convenience."

Under dissimilar conditions, Paul Carrington, the most popular magistrate in his district, was ten-

dered and had accepted the office of road-master a dozen years ago, and performed the duties connected therewith so creditably that smooth, well-graded highways were the rule throughout the territory over which he had jurisdiction.

Doctor Graham had this in mind in sanctioning the transfer of his patient to new quarters.

"A careful driver needn't hit a stone in the five miles," he asserted complacently, "nor run into a mud-hole. The road is as smooth as a floor. We know whom we have to thank for *that!*"

Beth recalled the tribute with a glow of pleasure in settling down luxuriously among her ample cushions. She reminded herself too that this was the first absolutely quiet hour she could call her very own for five days past. Preparations for Paul's journey and the bustle of the leave-taking had kept the household in a ferment of unrest. As for herself—she reflected now—she had not had time to take her new wonderful happiness to her heart and "cuddle" it. That was the way she phrased it. To care for others weaker than she, to comfort the sorrowing, nurse the sick in body and in mind—in a word, to put the welfare and woes of those about her before her own affairs—was the second nature born of habit that generally outgrows the first.

"At thirty-six, one is no longer romantic," she had said once playfully to Helen, commenting upon a love-story they had read together. She laughed at the recollection, now.

When, just ten days ago, Paul Carrington had

pleaded, "And now, that you know it all—my mad follies and my struggles to live down shameful memories, and to make myself over into the man who has some show of right to ask you to be his wife—can you learn to love me, Beth?" she had looked, unabashed, into his eyes and said:

"I ought to be perfect in the lesson. I have studied it for fifteen years and more."

She closed her eyes in repeating it to herself now, and dreamed blissfully—as she had never dared dream before in all her life. She could not tell just when she awoke to the consciousness that the man who, she thought, was like a brother to her, was dearer than any brother could ever have been, and outranked all other earthly loves combined. Since then she had made no secret to her candid soul of the truth. The passion of pity she had felt for the stricken victim of a wily, heartless adventuress, the reverence strengthened daily by the sight of his steadfast devotion to his mother and the work he shared with her; his invariable kindness to high and low; the perfection of breeding that never let him overlook the observance of the "small, sweet courtesies" that make the poetry of domestic life; his patience under wrongs done to himself, and his generous indignation at wrongs done to the innocent and helpless—all this and innumerable other concurrent circumstances had wrought upon her heart, soul, and mind to bring to pass the miracle of happiness that possessed her in the knowledge that her demigod had become her lover.

What romance, ever conceived and written, equalled the glorious reality? She stanched happy tears hastily as Mr. Rice rode up to the carriage-door.

He looked down instantly, and feigned to be intent upon guarding his horse's legs against impact with the wheel.

"We have only half a mile farther to go," he said, easily. "We have travelled well. I wanted to say to you, before we get to the house, that you must not hesitate to call upon me for anything that I can do to make all this easier for you."

He leaned over the wheel to put his hand on the door, after the fashion of the mounted escort of the region, and lowered his voice:

"*I* should have a share in the business, you know. We are told that those who sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind. I am mercifully let off with what is a mere zephyr by comparison with the tornado a far better man has had to buffet for years. Set your mind at rest with regard to me. I hope the trip will not be too much for you?"

"It has been restful—thank you! And all the more because you are with us."

He lifted his hat and fell back to the doctor's side.

Quaint, plucky, *dear* little man! Yet what was the mourning over his "broken dream" when one thought of the fight he had likened to a tornado that had swept over his comrade?

She thanked God again with heart and voice for

the blessed calm that must chase away the memory of the tempest.

Both the Blankenships were on the lookout for them, and hurried together to the side of the carriage as it stopped at the gate.

The wife was foremost in explanation of conditions that awaited the visitors:

"She's been that dreadful ever sence she heard that she was to be took away, that I was afeared we couldn't git her ready, nohow we could fix it. Fust place, she declared she wouldn't budge a step! That was when I had jest shook her awake, and she was out of her head for a while. Then when she heered whar she was to be took, she laughed and cried for nigh upon five minnits and we jest was obleeged to give her a good stiff drink of brandy to git her quiet. Yes, doctor! I knowed you wouldn't like it! But what was we to do? She mus' be heished up in some way. 'Light! won't you, Miss 'Lizabeth!" removing her bulk from the open door that Beth might get out. "An' come right in! She's quiet now."

"Dead drunk, you mean!" said her husband, crossly. "I told *her* how 'twould be, doctor, when she would pour out the liquor for her, instid of lettin' me do it. Not but what it will be easier to tote her to the carriage, an' out of it if the drunk hol's on that long. She mought 'a' raised a rumpus ef she had any notion of what we was doin' with her."

Doctor Graham walked on with him in close confabulation as they skirted the main building to gain

the wing. Mrs. Blankenship kept her post at Beth's ear and talked her fastest:

"She ain't a-goin' to live long nowhere, and I'm mighty glad to git shet of her, for my part. She's been the biggest keer I've ever had—an' you may know keepin' a po'house ain't no fun at any time. 'Slong as she knowed what she was about, I could manage her a little. But for the las' week—well, *thar!* Thar ain't no use tryin' to tell you 'bout it. Me an' Sukey Logan, we done packed up all her clo'es in her trunk, an' put clean clo'es on her. She was like somebody dead while we was doin' of it. Rashe, he scolded me for the big dose o' liquor. *I* say 'twould 'a' served him right not to have give it to her at all, an' let him git her ready an' off!" She glanced up at Mr. Rice in saying it, and cackled aloud.

He turned on his heel, walked away a dozen steps or so, and stood there, staring stonily over the fields. Beth forgot her own horror and dreads in sympathy with the frightful reaction that must supersede his quiet self-possession. This drunken castaway was the woman he had once loved. Why had she—why had Madam Carrington let him come?

The low-browed room reeked with brandy fumes and fœtid odors. The doctor rushed to both windows and pulled aside the curtains to let in all the air they would admit. The bedstead had been dragged into the middle of the floor and stripped of all covering, revealing the soiled ticking of the feather-bed, swelling above the form sunk in the

middle. It might have been a corpse but for the irregular, stertorous respiration. Mr. Rice startled them all by speaking from the door:

"Doctor Graham! shall I have the stretcher brought in here?"

"At once—please! the sooner we are off, the better!"

Even the Blankenships were mute until the bearers of the litter—Aleck, the High Hill carriage-driver, and a colored pauper—appeared upon the porch. Then Rashe bustled out to lend a hand. Mr. Rice followed him into the room and pushed aside the negro who would have raised the recumbent figure. He said not a word, but Beth never forgot the face turned away with averted eyes from the "thing" he helped Doctor Graham shift from the bed to the litter. She followed them closely. One horrified glance at the face—wasted almost out of semblance to a human visage, darkly flushed by brandy, eyes closed, and mouth open—turned her sick to faintness. She hardly knew who or where she was as she walked in the wake of the short procession to the waiting carriage. Mimy brought her back to herself and the present.

"Miss 'Lizabeth! you ain't never goin' to ride inside the car'iage with *that!* 'Tain't fitten, no way you can fix it! Mr. Rice! *please*, suh!" as he let himself down from the carriage-steps after the litter with its burden had been set in place, "won't you persuade Miss 'Lizabeth not to get in there? Let me do it, and she won't min' for onct, a-settin' out-

side with Aleck! I don't know what mistis will say ef so be we 'low a white lady to ride 'longside of *that!*"

A gesture of intense loathing finished the protest.

Before Mr. Rice could speak, Beth moved forward and put her foot upon the step:

"It is my place! Nobody else shall have it! Should she need attention I will call you, Mimy—or Doctor Graham. Good-by, Mrs. Blankenship!" She put her hand into that extended by Betsey, who, for once in her life, was awed into silence. "I thank you for all you have done for us in taking care of her! Good-by, Mr. Blankenship! No! Mr. Rice! there is not room for more than one person in here—thank you, all the same!"

"Game to the back-bone!" ejaculated Rashe, as he returned to his waiting spouse after seeing the *cortége* through the draw-bars. "I never would 'a' thought 'twas in her! Reckon she caught her sperrit from the old Madam. I wisht I could 'a' gone along and seed 'em git her out o' the car'iage at High Hill. I dar' swar that no sech trash ever crossed that door-sill befo' sence the house was built!"

"*They*'ll git the credit of it, you may be sure!" retorted Betsey, tartly. "Let these 'ristocrats alone for takin' all the comfortin' Scripters to theirselves! 'bout feedin' the poor and rescuin' the perishin', an' all that! The ole Madam will be talked about an' preached about after she's dead an' gone, for openin' her doors to the chile of her ole frien'. *We've* been a-nussin' her, an' puttin' up with her high-

'n'-mighty ways for nigh 'pon two mont's, without gittin' a penny for it. An' that meachin' little thing that *would* git into the car'iage with her—for to show off befo' the doctor and the preacher—will be called a saint 'long's she lives. Ef them ain't Pharisees an' highpercreets, I don' know the breed when I see it!"

Rashe held his peace even from the good that might have resulted from the exhibition of a bank-bill passed over to him by Mr. Rice, with Madam Carrington's thanks for the care he had bestowed upon the daughter of her old friends. He was enjoined to secrecy at the same time.

"You may know that she lives up to the rule 'Let not your right hand know what your left hand doeth,'" the minister had added in the same confidential tone. "She had no idea that the patient was really dangerously ill until the doctor called this morning. When Mr. Carrington was here last, you spoke hopefully of her."

"That's a fac'! So I did!" replied the overseer. "She was that gayly and peart when she warn't downright sick, that we'd no notion things was so bad. The doctor gives her up, he tells me. Her goin' away saves the county a bill for the fun'ral. 'Tain't noways likely as Madam would have her buried from High Hill at the public expense!"

The minister turned away without another word. Was the suggestion, conjoined with the "broken dream," harrowing even to a "cured" lover?

Doctor Graham was inclined to be loquacious for

the first mile or two of the homeward journey. The experience he was now going through was novel, and he rather enjoyed it, never having known the principal actress in the drama in her bellehood. At that time, he was a medical student at the university, and never at home except in vacation. If he had ever seen Molly Watkins it was in his callow boyhood, when pretty girls were less interesting than baseball and fishing. Nor had he ever heard so much as a whisper connecting her name with that of the retired minister who now officiated as the High Hill chaplain and family friend.

Mimy and Aleck carried on an animated dialogue in whispers upon the driver's box, and each primed the other with gossip anent the "po'house" and the horde of residents they had espied peeping from divers hiding-places at the sensational spectacle enacted in the front yard.

Within the vehicle reigned silence that might be felt. Beth had thrown herself valiantly into the forefront of the contest relative to the change in the programme decided upon by Madam Carrington and herself, and had won her point. At heart, she abhorred the task she had undertaken as Madam's representative. After ensconcing herself in the corner left for her, she gave one look at her motionless companion to make sure that she seemed as comfortable as was possible in the extraordinary circumstances; then she leaned back and shut her eyes. She had heard that the sick woman was an opium-eater. That she should also be a common

drunkard was inexpressibly revolting. She did not wish that the hospitality of High Hill had been denied to the prodigal. She was in full accord with Madam's impulsive benevolence, and ready to bear her share of the cross. She *did* shrink from actual contact with the sinner when she was vulgarly and indubitably *drunk!* Chide the feeling as she might and did, every virtuous and womanly instinct arose in arms against the necessity of sitting so close to the woman that the skirt of her white dress mingled with the folds of the shawl thrown over the patient's lower limbs.

The face was turned quite away toward the other side of the coach. Beth was thankful for that. A single look at it, as she entered that mean room, had been too much for her. One hand lay limp and motionless upon the cover. Beth would have said that her eye fell upon it, by and by, by the merest accident. It was emaciated until the bones showed white and stark through the skin strained over them. One, on the outer side of the wrist, stood out in unnatural prominence. Just below this, a white line—a cicatrice paler than the sallow cuticle surrounding it—perhaps the eighth of an inch wide—ran clear across the back of the wrist, terminating abruptly and squarely there. After staring at it for a moment as a fascinated bird gazes into the snake's eyes, Beth leaned forward and took the wasted wrist into her hand, shuddering as she touched it. It was hot and dry and a mere bundle of sinew and bone. It was delicately shaped; the fingers were

long and tapering. The vague sense of familiarity with it, that laid hold upon her at sight of the scar, deepened and took form. Of one thing she felt sure. This was not Mary Watkins's hand! It was smaller, more refined in contour and in the texture of the skin, and there was no such mark upon poor Molly's wrist. True, it might be the trace of a wound made since her elopement. Doctor Graham had alluded to her hard life. The thought that had stabbed Beth at first sight of it was too preposterous to be remembered for an instant. She was angry with herself for having allowed it to shoot across her mind. With an ejaculation of self-disgust, she pulled the shawl over the moveless hand, and withdrew as far as space would allow from her obnoxious fellow-tenant of the coach.

The journey was, of necessity, more tedious than the brisk run in the earlier part of the day. Aleck had had his orders to avoid jar and jolt, and obeyed to the letter.

"We might be a funeral procession!" said Beth, more impatiently than she was wont to speak, as Doctor Graham peered into the window for the fifth time, to see for himself that the patient was quiet. "Is it absolutely necessary that we should drive all the way at this rate? I don't believe she knows whether we go fast or slowly."

"She will probably remain in her present condition for hours to come," was the rejoinder, "if indeed she ever rallies from it. That fool of a woman overdosed her with a vengeance! If she were not

used to it, the 'dram' would be fatal in her present state."

He made no pretense of guarding tone or language. That he had judged correctly of the condition of the subject of the observation was proved by the lax stillness of the prostrate figure.

A wave of remorseful pity rushed over Beth's heart.

"Oh, I am sorry I complained!" she said, penitently. "Don't hurry, please! I am quite comfortable. Don't run any risk of making her worse!"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders with a wry smile, in falling to the rear. Beth settled back in her corner, wrapped in gloomy meditations that were now mixed with self-reproach. She, who only that morning had declared herself to be the happiest of women, could be as fretful as a spoiled child set to perform a disagreeable task, when opportunity was offered her to minister to another woman, helpless, poor, and sick unto death. Sitting in the very shadow of that death, she had thought, not of prayer or compassion, but of her own selfish ease!

"God forgive me, and let me help her in some way before she goes!" she whispered, and bent over the litter to adjust the pillow that had slipped from under the woman's cheek.

As she stooped she felt the hot breath, foul with liquor, upon her face, and, in the horror of the moment, her hand dropped nerveless to her side, dragging the pillow with it. The head, jarred by the motion, rolled partly over, and the bleared eyes

opened. In an agony of haste and alarm, Beth slipped her arm under the heavy head and replaced the pillow. In doing it, she spoke reassuringly in her gentlest tone:

"There! Is that all right again? Is it quite easy?"

Dull-red fire burned back of the eyes; the dried lips tried to frame articulate words.

"Don't try to speak!" pursued Beth, smiling into the working face. "Just lie still and try to sleep a little longer. We have not far to go now."

The eyes were wide open and the evil gleam in their depths was a glare. A hiss escaped from the writhing lips. Beth laid her ear low to catch it.

"*Beth Moore!*" she caught, and waited breathlessly for what came next—one word at a time, each gasped, as with a parting breath:

"*You shan't marry Paul Carrington!*"

With the supreme effort that brought out the final syllable, the head fell to one side, the eyes rolled back in the sockets.

Beth never knew whence she drew the strength that enabled her to call Doctor Graham. Stunned into unnatural composure, she watched him try to pour restoratives down the woman's throat, and, at his behest, herself bathed her face with water and fanned her until a flutter of the pulse and a struggle for breath told that the swoon was passing.

"A damnable business!" Beth heard the doctor mutter, savagely. "She isn't worth it!"

Then, with the peremptoriness that sank the

gentleman in the physician, he bade Mimy mount his horse, installed Beth in the seat vacated by the maid, and took her place inside of the carriage.

With it all, he made time for an aside to Mr. Rice:

"Let Aleck take your horse, and do you drive the rest of the way! And keep an eye upon that poor child. The shock has been too much for her. The fresh air may save her from fainting. But *watch* her, as for your life!"

CHAPTER XVII

MADAM CARRINGTON was upon the front porch with a band of sable attendants, when four stalwart field-hands bore their burden up the steps and were directed by the mistress to carry it into the Chamber.

In one instant Beth's quick wits comprehended why Madam had acquiesced so readily in the altered plan submitted by her chief helpers. Neither Beth nor Mr. Rice would have consented, without vigorous demur, to turning the most important room in the house into a hospital ward, and, by the desecration, depriving the head of the family of her own quarters. The bearers had received their orders beforehand, for they marched with military precision into the hall and faced about at the threshold of the open door. The curtains had been taken down from the bed and the snow-white covers were turned down ready for immediate use.

Not one of the amazed trio of spectators had time to speak before the insensible woman was laid upon the bed and Madam was adjusting the pillows.

"*Mother!*" The cry was Beth's as she grasped the lady's arm. "This ought not to be! I thought, of course, she would be taken up-stairs. We cannot let you give up your room!"

"It is my wish and my pleasure to do it. A sick-

room should always be on the lower floor when it is practicable to do this. Be quiet, my child! Everything is arranged as it should be. I have meant this all along. Now, doctor!" A wave of the hand dispersed the group of servants and brought him to her side. "Can she be undressed and put to bed? Or must we wait until she is stronger?"

"She rallied for a few minutes on the road and tried to talk, but instantly relapsed into the coma," said the physician. "Her pulse is too weak for us to attempt to do more at present than try to stimulate the heart-action. She may respond to the treatment. She may not. May I ask you, Madam, to assist me? Mimy! we may want you here. Miss Elizabeth! you will please me by going to your own room and resting for a couple of hours. Mr. Rice! should we need you, we will let you know."

Helen was at Beth's side and wound her arm about her as they began the ascent of the staircase.

"I am not wanted there! I'm glad I'm not! I wouldn't stay for all the doctors in Christendom, when you, darling, look so sick and faint. Lean hard on me, sweet mother! I could carry you up in my arms if you would let me try!"

The coaxing accents and tender caressing were better for the tired listener than any restorative in the doctor's portly saddle-bags. A gush of natural tears loosened the intolerable tension of the heart-strings and softened the hard lump in her throat. She could not speak, but when Helen led her to

the bed and with loving violence half-lifted her upon it, she caught the girl to her breast and wept aloud.

Helen shut the door and brought a bottle of cologne to the bed, drenching her handkerchief with the fragrant fluid, and bathing Beth's face before uttering a syllable. Intuitively she appreciated that there was something here beyond the reach of anything she could think of saying. She must keep before the weeper's mind the one truth of her love and passionate longing to be of help to her in some way, then trust to time and her own perceptions to indicate that way.

Her heart leaped with joyful relief when Beth dried her eyes and put up her lips for a kiss. It was given with unction.

"She is tired to death—so she is!" Helen cooed anew, mopping the tremulous hands with the cologne and blowing lightly upon them to make them cooler by hastening evaporation. She had learned the trick from Beth, as the latter recollected with affectionate amusement. It was very sweet and, just now, singularly consoling to be petted and tended by Paul's child.

She opened her eyes gratefully upon the solicitous face so near hers:

"Thank you for looking so much like your father to-day! It has been a great help to me. But, darling, I have not asked you all this time where your grandmother is to sleep. It is *dreadful* that she should be turned out of her room!"

Helen nodded backward toward the hall.

"In the spare-room over there! You may know that I had a battle-royal with her before I gave in to the ridiculous notion. She was obstinate to the end. Gibraltar is a quicksand by comparison! She cannot forgive the doctor and father and, least of all, herself for not knowing how ill the Watkins woman is. She says she should have been decently lodged and nursed ever since she showed up at the poorhouse. But you'll hear the latest edition—with copious notes—as soon as she has time to talk it out. What a crow-bait of an object the returned prodigal is, to be sure! One glimpse was enough for me."

Beth closed her eyes and moaned:

"*Don't*, precious child! I can't bear to talk of it yet. It was all too horrible! I must lie still and try to forget it until my head gets clear and steady."

"Which it won't do while I am chattering like a poll-parrot! You poor persecuted angel of patience!" punctuating the sentence with soft kisses upon all of Beth's face she could get at, above and below the shielding hands.

"It is high time somebody took this matter in hand! If father had been here, none of this abominable farce would have been played. As next of kin, I take the helm! One fact remains! You are to be my especial charge from this time henceforward until other people, who shall be nameless, come to their senses. I am going to administer a dose of valerian, then darken the room, and command you to sleep for the next hour. *And*"—dog-

gedly—"if, during that time, man, woman, or child invades these sacred precincts, he, she, or it enters over my dead body!"

The loving nonsense did more to quiet the racked nerves than reason could have effected. Beth's smile and voice were natural as she thanked her nurse and promised to be obedient.

"I must have time to think it all over, or I shall go mad!" she whispered to herself when the door closed noiselessly behind the retreating form.

Below-stairs, the commander of the active forces had restored a show of law and order. A swift courier had ridden post-haste over to Doctor Graham's house to report that he would spend the night at High Hill unless summoned thence by another "extreme case." The patient was in bed, and, although the coma still held her, breathed more easily; the heart had responded partially to the stimulant, and there were no tokens of suffering. Becca, the best nurse on the plantation—a "likely" mulatto, trained from girlhood by her mistress for this particular line of work—was installed as custodian in the silent chamber, and strict orders were sent throughout the grounds surrounding the house and kitchen that the like quiet should prevail there.

An hour brought supper-time, and the family assembled about the table, if not merrily, with cheerful mien, and on the part of Doctor Graham and Helen, with good appetites.

"Still quiet, and with no indication of any immediate change," were the returns from the temporary

hospital ward, as the physician joined the little company collected after supper in the side-porch.

"Our talking will not disturb her?" queried Madam, solicitously.

"It would not, if your voices could be heard in the room, which they cannot be. Becca will call me should the patient be restless."

Helen stood no more in awe of doctors than of ministers, and she had her word ready:

"Funny—isn't it? how none of us give her her name? The doctor, of course, uses what naturalists would term 'the generic title.' The Queen of England—or, we will say, Mrs. Rashe Blankenship—would be to him just 'a patient,' a subject to be cured, or killed, or dissected!"

"Helen!" interjected her grandmother in reproof, neutralized by the doctor's jolly laugh.

"Convenient in the present instance, Miss Saucebox! I doubt if any one of us is altogether certain in his or her own mind what name to apply to the—Molly Watkins-that-was. The generic term comes in handy here."

In the moonlight he could see Beth start, and her voice was oddly muffled as she asked: "What makes you say that? Have you any reason for disbelieving what she tells of herself?"

He laughed again and more heartily:

"She has told so much that one may be excused for not troubling oneself to credit—or to recollect. If you mean do I believe that the wreck of what was once a woman that lies in that room"—jerking

his thumb in the direction of the Chamber,—"was, fifteen or sixteen years back, Mary—often called 'Molly' Watkins, born and bred in this county, who ran away—I am sorry to say *not* to be married—after having her fling as a dashing belle—I have not the slightest doubt as to her identity. Besides the tattooed initials on her shoulder, which, by the way, I have seen—we have sufficient evidence of the truth of her story to convince all the juries in America. Why"—still laughing—"she can give you the pedigree of every family in the county, with scandals about most of them that would make their honored ancestors turn in their graves. She knows the Watkins clan from Adam down to her own father—who, now I come to think of it, was also named 'Adam.' She was a joy to paupers and overseer when she was tolerably well and—sober! I told you she has been an opium-fiend for nobody knows how long. Not even herself, I suspect. The habit got hold of her, maybe five, maybe ten, years ago. She claims to have travelled pretty nearly all over the world, and mingled in very fine society. She has got to the end of her tether now—poor sinner!"

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and refilled it.

"Don't, doctor—*please!*" It was Madam Carrington who spoke. "Every word goes to my soul! I have done some mighty hard thinking to-day and none of it was harder than the blame I heap upon myself and other professing Christians in our county, and especially in our church, for the part we have

played in this shameful affair. I can think of nothing but the ninety-and-nine who stayed safe and comfortable in the green pastures beside the still waters, while the Shepherd went to seek the wandering sheep. From what you tell us of the poorhouse and the doings there, there are more than fifty straying sheep whom we have left to their own devices and to their own fate. To their own deserts, you may say! That was not the Master's way of dealing with sinners. Like yourself, I have no doubt as to the identity of this poor creature. For a while I refused to admit the possibility that her frightful story might be true. The evidence is overwhelming. And we, the well-fed, self-satisfied ninety-and-nine, priding ourselves upon our 'missionary spirit,' have never lifted a finger to save her soul—or the souls of the rest of the wanderers within hearing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Oh, the shame of it! the *shame* of it!"

Had a thunderbolt fallen through the roof at their feet, the listeners to the impassioned outburst could not have been more confounded. The doctor's hand was arrested half-way to his pipe; Beth sat back in the shade with drooping head, and Mr. Rice leaned against the railing, his face half-hidden by his hand. Undaunted Helen found expression first:

"But, grandmother! you forget that Mr. Rice did preach at the poorhouse often when he *could* preach! You can't blame him for not going there now. And when he did go, nobody seemed to want

him, or care to listen to what he had to say. The overseer had to drive them into the room to hear the sermon, and the mothers wouldn't keep the babies quiet—and it was all mighty discouraging. You must admit that!"

"I am blaming myself most of all, my child! There are not ten people in our church—the strongest in the county!—who have been members of it longer than I. I am old enough to be Mr. Rice's mother. Did I ever go to the poorhouse with him? I knew there were ignorant and sinful women there. Did I ever seek out the lost? Don't try to excuse me! These thoughts have been brewing in my mind for months. I put them aside when they were very obtrusive by saying that my duty was in my own home, upon my own plantation, and in my own church, first of all. And that when all this should be done, there would be time enough to extend my 'sphere of usefulness.' That was what I called it in the stupidity of my self-righteousness. Mr. Rice did not need to be encouraged to preach once a month at the poorhouse. He was young and had pastured all his life with the ninety-and-nine. Woman's work and woman's wit and woman's love were what were needed there, more than one sermon a month. God forgive me! I can never forgive myself!"

Another pause that grew awesome as time went on. Helen, alive to all about her, told Beth afterward that it terrified her when she could hear the ticking of the watch in the doctor's fob as he sat by her.

Beth's hand stole over to that which lay in Madam's lap and the two were interlocked tightly.

At last, Doctor Graham spoke. He would have described himself as a man of practical, hard, every-day sense, without an atom of sentimentality in his make-up. His comment was characteristic:

"It is exactly as you have said, my dear Madam. But what are you going to do about it? I can't agree with you that it is women's work. And you have no idea what kind of soil your missionaries would have to cultivate. It's all briers and thorns, so to speak. And even if there were hope of making it arable, would it pay? There is enough work laid ready to the hand of each of us, as you have truly remarked, to fill every minute of time and employ all our energies. Doesn't it seem—pardon me! but the thought strikes me always, when I listen to the orations of so-called reformers—doesn't it seem a little Quixotic to expend strength in working barren ground when better soil is demanding cultivation?"

Rejoinder came from an unexpected quarter.

The little minister stood up in the moonlight at his full height and spoke in a voice of surprising volume and clearness:

"If 'Don Quixote' had been written, say, in the year 10 B.C., that is what the scribes and Pharisees—who, I take it, were the ninety-and-nine of that date—would have said of the Master's work. Much that has been said to-night has been sticking like a thorn in my conscience for many a day. What

are we to do, you ask, doctor? I am not prepared to say, only that *something* ought to be done—in the name and in the strength of Him whose errand to earth was to seek and save those who were classed with the lost by men who filled high places in the synagogues. Miss Elizabeth!" bowing toward her with old-world courtesy, "you are very tired and the doctor will agree with me in deciding that you should not sit up longer."

CHAPTER XVIII

HELEN CARRINGTON, who had her Shakespeare upon the tip of her tireless tongue, insisted that Mr. Rice did not wait until

> "the early village cock
> Hath thrice done salutation to the morn"

before he arose to the duties of the day.

"It is my belief that he gives the signal for salutation No. 1. The boldest chanticleer on the place dare not utter a 'peep' until the shutters of the office-windows are opened."

They were wide open on the morning succeeding the arrival of Doctor Graham's "patient" at High Hill. The little minister stood in the doorway, facing the newly-risen sun, and taking in deep drafts of the scented air, when he espied the flutter of a white gown between clumps of shrubbery, and advanced to meet Beth Moore hurrying across the lawn toward him.

"You will get your feet wet!" he called, when she was within speaking distance. Changing the warning note in stooping to lay his hand upon the turf—"No danger! There is not a drop of dew! And by the same token, we may expect rain within twenty-four hours."

The last sentence granted her time to get her

breath, as he meant it should. Whatever she had to say should await her convenience. His tact in minor points of breeding was unfailing.

"I know that the grass is dry." Beth's complexion was drained to-day of all suspicion of color; her eyes were large and dark. "I ran out the back way, not to disturb anybody indoors. Can you spare me ten minutes? I must talk to you before they are all astir."

He had offered his arm mutely, as was the graceful fashion of the time, and they had turned, by tacit agreement, into the walk leading to the garden-gate.

"I stole down-stairs very softly to look into the Chamber. The door was open all night, of course, that Doctor Graham, who slept on a parlor sofa, might hear every sound. He was snoring comfortably when I came out. Becca tiptoed into the hall and whispered that 'she' had laid like a log, and not given a bit of trouble!"

"Graham predicted last night that there would be no change for hours," replied Mr. Rice, indifferently. "Shall we go into the rose-arbor? No one can see us there from the house. There is no haste! Take your time. I am afraid *you* have had a restless night. I wish I could persuade you to take more thought for yourself, and to be less distressed over other people's troubles."

They were in the arbor, and he brushed a garden-chair with his handkerchief before seating her in it.

She forced a grateful smile.

"You must not be too kind to me, or I shall not be able to talk sensibly and collectedly. There is nobody else to consult now that Paul is away. And it so happens that I could not tell him some *things!* —the things that worry me most of all. I can be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Rice!"—facing him abruptly—"*who* is this woman who calls herself 'Molly Watkins'?"

The vehemence with which she flung out the words was so foreign to her usual manner that a more nervous man would have been at a loss for a direct answer. He raised his eyebrows slightly in meeting her imploring look. There was no sign of surprise in tone and demeanor:

"You heard me say last night what I think—what no one who has investigated the case can doubt. I believe that the battered wreck of what was once a handsome woman is what she declares herself to be. Doctor Graham is as confident as myself, and so is Blankenship, who has had the best possible opportunities of knowing the truth. Have you any especial reason for asking the question?"

"You may think that my imagination has run away with my judgment." Beth made a heroic effort to seem at her ease. "I will tell you what first aroused—I cannot say 'suspicions,' for they are hardly that! But I have had misgivings. Let me try to make you understand!"

Still putting force upon her nervous unrest, she told him of the discovery of the scar upon the woman's wrist.

"Of course you will say, as I reminded myself, that a scar does not tell its age after a year or so, and this may be the mark of a hurt received after she ran away. But"—leaning toward him and speaking impressively—"although Mary Watkins had no such scar on her wrist—Cécile Carrington had! She told me that her brother slashed her wrist with a razor in a fit of rage when they were children. Although it was not very distinct when she was plump and her skin white, she was sensitive about it, and always wore either a bracelet or a band of black velvet over it. Now that this—*person*—is thin and sallow, it is a livid line across the back of the wrist."

A gesture broke the sentence: "Pardon me, dear friend! but you are taking too much for granted. Against the evidence of a scar that may not be a year old, I set the numerous proofs I have cited of the extreme improbability that this is the woman of whose death we have a legal certificate under the hand and seal of the American Legation in the city in which she died and was buried."

"We had a similar story once before!" interrupted Beth, bitterly.

"Granted! but that was the work of a wily, unprincipled conspirator, contrived to gain his own selfish purposes. The character of the official who forwarded the proofs of the decease of 'Mrs. Jules Dupont' abroad puts him above suspicion."

"Don't you suppose that I have been all over that again and again, until I am half-mad! I did

not sleep an hour all night. For—there was something else! She recognized me and spoke twice while we were together in the carriage. And the intonations reminded me of—the other woman! She was faint, and brought out every word with difficulty. And the voice might have been Mary Watkins's or that of anybody else—it was a hoarse whisper—yet there was something that froze my heart's blood! She told me, calling me by name, that I '*could not marry Paul Carrington'!*"

She gasped it brokenly in an ecstasy of shame and grief, and buried her face in her handkerchief.

Mahlon Rice's tone was as gentle and tender as his sister's could have been.

"Dear, dear friend!" he reiterated. "Naomi's friend and mine for all these years! Could I argue this matter calmly if there were the shadow of a possibility that you have any ground for your misgivings? Paul is more to me than a brother could be. There is no living creature whom I love more devotedly. Could I entertain for one minute a theory that would shatter his happiness for all time? I would stake my soul upon the firm conviction that your excited imagination—wrought, as you say, almost to madness—has built up a tragedy that is simply incredible because—are you listening?—because it is beyond the bounds of reason and possibility. You are terribly shaken by what you have seen and endured during the last twenty-four hours, and utterly incapable of thinking like the cool-headed, rational woman you will be to-

morrow. Impossibilities do not happen! And this wild fancy can never crystallize into a reality. It was a mistake to bring that creature here. It was a more grievous blunder to let you be mixed up in the dirty affair!"

He forgot to pick his words in the honest indignation that filled his soul. The unlikeness to his usual gentle dignity of bearing and speech struck Beth, in spite of the disorder of her faculties, with a sense of incongruousness that was positively amusing. He was so positive as to the stability of his argument, so free from apprehension of impending peril, that the horror of great darkness rolled from her mind as fogs before a cleansing breeze.

She wiped her eyes and showed him a brighter face than he had seen since the doctor's visit yesterday had tossed a bomb into their peaceful home.

"I will make myself believe you," she said, gratefully. "You are the wisest 'confessor' and truest friend that ever blessed the lives of those who confide in you. A magician, too, for I am not the poor crazed creature who came to the confessional a little while ago."

"Now"—straightening up, as one who had quaffed the elixir of new energy and purpose—"supposing—I would say,—'knowing' that the doctor's patient is what she claims to be—or, at any rate, not what my insane theory suggested that she might be—we can do nothing more just now than take care of her according to the doctor's orders—until the change comes?"

He patted the back of her hand approvingly. "Right, as usual! And, above all, keep our own counsel with regard to groundless suspicions as to mistaken identity and so forth. Madam Carrington would scout them as we do, but I would not lay a straw in the path of her beautiful work of charity toward the erring and unrepentant. What she said last night held mine eyes waking for hours. God helping me, I am going to think out a plan for reaching some of the outcasts we have passed by as hopelessly depraved. We have a doctrine in our church that one may commit the unpardonable sin. Theologians are not quite agreed as to what it is. The general belief, based upon the context, is that it is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. This is perhaps the right view to take of what is made a mystery of, to the hurt of some timid souls. I have wondered sometimes if refusing to seek and help save that which we Pharisees reckon as beyond the reach of God's mercy, may not belong to the same class of sins. 'If a man love not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?' We prate of the brotherhood of man, and then arrogate to ourselves the right to select from the great fraternity those who we think are worthy to be ministered to by our smug and saintly selves. We are not told what was the attitude of mind of the ninety-and-nine while the Shepherd was absent upon his errand of salvation. One who keeps an eye upon the secure fold of *our* age may figure to himself how they behaved, and what reception

the 'stray' had from his nearest of kin and former companions. God be merciful to us, sinners!"

He bared his head devoutly and sat looking at the ground under his feet until Beth made a movement to rise.

"I cannot thank you as I would for lifting the horrible burden from my heart!" she said, warmly. "You help me to comprehend why pious Catholics find comfort and strength in confession. You have been our spiritual director so long that I am afraid we impose upon you sometimes in the impulse to bring our worries and conflicts to the office, or"—smiling and looking at the leafy walls dotted with blooms—"*here!* You will let me say, too, and believe that I mean every word of it—that the sight of your resignation under misfortune, and of your constant ministrations to all who appeal to you for bodily or spiritual comfort and direction, do more to commend your religion to us than your charitable deeds and teachings."

He bowed silently without putting on his hat, and offered his arm for the walk back to the house.

"It doesn't look like the same world," remarked Beth when they paused at the gate to look over the wilderness of flower-edged alleys and weedless squares of vegetables, sloping gradually down to the fields of lush corn and billowing wheat. "I saw it under a black pall when I came out."

"The pall is generally of our own weaving. God's world is always beautiful. He 'giveth us all things

richly to enjoy.' If sorrow be added to it, it is, in a vast majority of instances, our own fault."

"There is Doctor Graham beckoning to us!" Beth quickened her steps in saying it, and her heart sank with a sickening roll. "I do hope——"

The doctor was upon them before she could finish. He was hatless and without cravat or collar.

"Becca called me a while ago to say that the patient was 'behavin' funny.' Which meant that she was tossing about and preparing to go off into one of her hysterical fits. I gave her something to quiet her for the time, but I am afraid to dose her enough to put her to sleep again. And—to make matters worse—here comes a call that must take me away in an hour or so."

"Not without your breakfast!" announced Madam, from the end of the porch nearest them. "While you are eating you can issue orders for the day. Lest you may have private preferences, I wish it to be distinctly understood that I appoint myself head nurse. Now, come into the dining-room. Breakfast is waiting!"

Two of the party obeyed. The doctor joined them incredibly soon when one surveyed the perfect propriety of a toilet so lately dishevelled. His coffee was poured out as soon as his step rang upon the polished floor of the hall, and by the time he was in his chair his plate was furnished with fried chicken and hot muffins.

He fell to work with a will, and nobody plied him with questions while his hunger was at flood-tide.

He had quaffed a second cup of coffee and disposed zestfully of a third waffle before—remarking that he "never mixed drugs with food"—he asked permission to leave the bounteous board and begged for a consultation with the head nurse.

They withdrew to a distant window, and Madam presently summoned Beth.

"She is my alternate," she explained. "Who is as competent to serve in the ward as myself. You think, then, doctor, that Mary may be able to take a little nourishment to-day? In anticipation of this, I had beef-tea, chicken jelly, and arrowroot blanc-mange made last night."

The doctor nodded hearty approval.

"Nothing could be better. We know that you are a genius in invalid cookery. I was saying to her, Miss Elizabeth, that for some hours we must go on with what topers call the 'cooling-off process.' We dare not stop it at once. I shall leave small doses of brandy and of an opiate to be administered at regular intervals all day, diminishing the quantity and lengthening the intervals gradually. She has marvellous vitality. She can never get well. That is a fixed fact. We may keep her alive for several days. She may go off without a moment's notice. The heart—and for that matter, every other organ—is hopelessly diseased. Keep her as quiet as you can. Should she be inclined to talk, discourage her. She wants to live. She told me last week that she had come to the county with an object, and that she would not die until it was

accomplished. "And if I didn't mean to live for any other reason, I *won't* die—just to spite *you!*"' Then she wandered off into another strain. All she says now is the wildest delirious fancy. Pay no attention to it. The Blankenship woman excited her by asking questions. It was a most Christianly act to bring her here. I can see that the change of air and the superior comfort of her surroundings are telling upon her already." He lowered his voice: "May I take the liberty of suggesting to you, Madam, that it would be better to send Miss Helen away for a few days? She is excitable and high-strung, and the environment is not—healthy! at present. She has so many friends that you may be at a loss to make choice of one who will be overjoyed to have a visit from her. Mrs. Graham—for instance—would be charmed, and so would be my daughters. Unless you think that she ought not to be kept in touch with this—*harrowing* case—through me? I can see that her interest in it is intense already. Constant association with those who have the wretched object in charge may be injurious. Pardon my freedom of speech! But I greatly admire your lovely granddaughter and I understand how dear she is to you both."

"Do not apologize, please! We appreciate the wisdom of your advice, and thank you for your interest in our girl. It occurred to me yesterday when I saw the feverish excitement with which she insisted upon taking part in the arrangements for the patient's arrival, that this must not go on.

Judith Carter has been begging for a visit from Helen for a long time. She was here last Monday, to invite her to spend a week with her to meet her cousins from Baltimore who are to come to-day."

"Good! better! *best!* I call this a providential interposition. If you will allow me, I will stop at Mr. Carter's on my way to Mr. Meade's this morning. I told you his head-man is ill, didn't I? May I raise Miss Judith to the seventh heaven of delight by saying that she may expect Miss Helen this evening? The sooner she is out of this atmosphere the better."

CHAPTER XIX

THUS it came about that with the descent of a wet twilight upon the venerable homestead, the family party seated about the supper-table was reduced to three. Helen had gone off in exuberant spirits before the first droppings of the rain prognosticated by the dewless dawn.

"Nothing could be more opportune!" she exulted. "If I could be of any use here it would be my duty and my pleasure to stay. As it is—" An expressive grimace said the rest.

"The house is like Tom Moore's 'banquet-hall deserted' without the winsome witch," Madam Carrington summed up the sentiments of her companions by saying over the teacups. "She tries my patience sometimes and"—lowering her voice as the footman busied himself at a remote side-table—"I confess that a resemblance we all recognize in manner and talk makes me uneasy when she lets her spirits run away with her tongue. But she is the apple of my eye, all the same. Doctor Graham's advice was very judicious. Whatever may be the developments of the next few days, no good could come to her from seeing and hearing it all."

Beth shuddered audibly: "Did you hear her tell me after dinner that she had peeped into the 'hospital ward' (she will call it nothing else) and caught a glimpse of the patient? This was her

story: 'Becca was lifting her head that she might drink something out of a glass, and she saw me! and gave a little screech. "You little imp of Satan!" she said. "Where did you come from?" As you may suppose, I didn't wait to hear any more, but ran for my life. And such a voice as she had! It was "Hark, from the tombs a doleful sound!" and grandmother scolded me for exciting her! What a death's-head she is, to be sure!' "

"I *did* tell her that she ought not to let the poor creature see her," replied Madam. "Becca said it was a long time before she quieted down. She would know who it was who had peeped at her, and insisted that it was a ghost, if it were not a devil. I found her quite exhausted when I went in. The child is right in describing her as a 'death's-head.' I doubt if her own mother would know her if she were alive to see the poor ruin. I am thankful she is not."

Madam Carrington and Beth were to divide the watch that night, Mimy sleeping upon a pallet in the hall, in case she should be needed. Becca was to have a long rest after the vigil of the preceding night and the cares of the day. Beth was dismissed to her room to get a few hours' sleep. At midnight she would relieve the elder custodian. The trained nurse had not yet blessed the earth, and the cares she was to assume in the next century devolved upon the family, friends, and neighbors of the stricken one. Madam had decreed wisely that the pitiable wreck stranded in the safe harbor of her home should

not be exhibited to the curious and indifferent who would be sure to tender services when the news got abroad of the removal of Rashe's lodger to more luxurious quarters. When, at half past eleven o'clock, Mr. Rice, who had been sitting alone upon the porch, entered the Chamber with soundless tread, Madam sat with her book in a distant corner, a tall folding-screen shutting the light of her lamp from the rest of the room.

Still noiselessly, the Little Minister approached the bed and stood beside it until he could discern through the gloom the figure of her who lay there. The room was lofty and spacious, and every window was open. But the labored respiration brought to his senses a faint but unmistakable odor of brandy and opium. The "cooling off" was still in operation. The lock of hair that had escaped from her cap trailed down the pillow.

In the gloom it looked almost black. He recollected, against his will, that he had told her, time and time again, that her hair was the true golden chestnut—the "*châtaigne dorée*" of French peasants, and how she liked to hear him say it. He had known no more bitter humiliation in his life than the mental nausea that overtook him at that instant. This pitiful wreck had been the one love of his manhood. Paul Carrington was a mere boy, new to the world that opened so many avenues of dizzying delight to the scion of an aristocratic and wealthy family, when he met the siren who had blasted his best years.

He—Mahlon Rice—walked deliberately into the snares laid for him by a girl in his own set, and straightway endowed her with all the graces of a goddess. Oh, it was a contemptible, squalid pretense of a romance! but he had had no other.

He might have fancied that the intensity of self-disgust that obsessed him had some occult influence upon the sick woman, for she threw up her arms with a hoarse shriek, and made as though she would rise from the bed. As he instinctively laid hold of the struggling hands, Madam Carrington spoke at his elbow—as calmly as if his presence there and then were altogether natural and proper.

"Take this for me, please!" she said, handing him a lighted taper, "and hold it so the light will not shine in her eyes."

Then she captured both the fluttering hands in one of hers and bent to the patient's ear:

"You are dreaming, my dear! There is nothing to be afraid of here. You are hot and thirsty. We must make you more comfortable."

Had the pauper been Beth, or Helen, her voice would not have been gentler, the intonation more persuasive. A basin of water stood upon a table by the bed. Madam dipped a cloth into it and bathed the hollow cheeks and the furrowed forehead, talking softly as she slipped her hand under the head to raise it to an easier position.

"There! that is better! Lie still for a minute!" She took the taper from Mr. Rice's hand and gave him a large light fan, motioning to him to use it.

Hardly more than a minute had elapsed when she was beside him again. The sick woman lay quiet with closed eyes under the soothing sweep of the fan. The man found himself obeying mechanically every gesture of his chief in office, and with no uneasy perception of the novelty of the situation thrust upon him. But one coherent phrase recurred to his misty fancy: Paul had spoken to him more than once or twice of his mother as "one born to command." Even the pitiable caricature of humanity to whom they ministered now, had some recognition of the magnetic force that swayed her rebellious mood.

Rebellion there was in the hollow eyes opened upon the lady's face, as she again raised the heavy head upon her firm palm and held a glass of iced milk to the dried mouth.

"Drink it!" she said, in the same caressing accents that had calmed the restless awakening. "It is cool and sweet! And you will sleep better after taking it. It is a long time since you have had anything to eat."

The black eyes did not leave the face so near hers while she swallowed the milk. But she obeyed unresistingly, and as Madam passed the emptied glass to her silent assistant, sighed deeply and satisfiedly.

"Good!" she ejaculated, her voice growing stronger with each syllable. "I like it!" Then, fingering the sheet under her hand, she added, without removing her strained gaze from her attendant's face: "This is a linen sheet!"

"It is, my dear! This is summer, you know."

The toneless voice caught her up, "And this is my bed! *Mine!*"

Madam smiled naturally:

"Of course it is! I hope you are going to have another comfortable night's rest in it. We will take away the light and keep everything quiet."

The wasted hands clutched her arm as she would have moved—the fixed stare of the great eyes grew fierce:

"Do you know"—in a hissing whisper that cut the air like a whip—"how I *hate* you!"

"Yes?" As one might humor a fractious child. Gently disengaging one hand, she dipped the other in the bowl of fragrant water, and laid it on the forehead corrugated with impotent fury. "We will talk of that in the morning. We can't let you lie awake any longer. Go to sleep now!"

The subtle magnetism to which the disordered intellect had yielded before, prevailed over the unruly temper. With another long struggling sigh the crazed creature turned her face to the pillow and lay still.

"Thank you for coming in," Madam Carrington said to her friend in motioning him toward the door. "You were a timely help to me. I think she will be quiet now. She is easily exhausted."

He stopped at the outer door.

"Let me stay all night?" he pleaded. "Is it quite safe for you and Miss Beth to be without a man within hearing? She might become violent."

A half-smile flitted over the lady's face.

"She is too weak to be dangerous. No, dear friend! I thank you again for coming. But we shall do well now. Good night!"

He could not disobey openly. He walked down the steps and disappeared in the darkness. She had gone back to her post when he stealthily mounted the steps and resumed his seat within hearing of the sick chamber. The rain dripped from the wet vines softly, and for a long time he heard nothing else. At last he got up and trod noiselessly to the nearest unshuttered window. Except for the feeble yellow glow of the shaded lamp behind the screen, the great room was in deepest shadow. Presently, eyes used to the black outer night, made out the outline of a motionless figure kneeling by the big bed, her face buried in her hands. Madam Carrington was praying in an agony of desire for the castaway.

He went back to his chair and did not leave it until the east showed a wan glow.

Throughout the lonely vigil certain words from an immortal parable sounded in his ears and heart, and were accentuated by the memory of that solitary kneeling figure:

"And when he hath found it he *layeth it on his shoulder.*"

The lost one was not driven back to the fold, nor even led. The Shepherd laid him across his shoulder as one who had found a prize. The wanderer became as "one whom his mother comforteth."

CHAPTER XX

Doctor Graham did not conceal his dissatisfaction with existing conditions in the hospital-ward revealed by his morning visit.

The patient's vital forces were waning. That was to be expected. He was graver over the admission that slipped through Beth's brief report of her night-watch, that she had not gone on duty until two o'clock A. M. Madam Carrington had not awakened her at midnight as had been arranged.

"She let me sleep because she said she was so wakeful!" explained Beth, simply. "It was very kind in her, but I hope you will ask her not to let it happen again. I am strong and much younger than she, and I have the happy faculty of being able to catch a refreshing nap in the daytime, which sets me up all right. She cannot sleep except at night."

The doctor fulfilled his promise to remonstrate with the elder woman, after the daily examination of the patient was concluded. He withdrew with his hostess to a window so remote from the bed that their skilfully modulated tones would not have been audible to the occupant had she been sane and wakeful.

"My dear Madam, you should consider how valuable at this juncture are your own health and

strength," was the text of a brief lecture to which the lady listened with imperturbable composure.

"At my age, one requires less sleep than at yours—or Beth's," she replied as he paused. "A more important matter is the state of that poor child over there," nodding toward the far corner. "Tell me frankly, doctor, is there a possibility that she may recover her reason and be able to think and talk coherently before the end comes?"

He pursed his lips obstinately.

"Not one chance in a thousand! If you mean to ask me if she will ever regain consciousness in so far as the ability to recall clearly her past, and comprehend where she is and what she has become—I should say decidedly 'No!' and add 'Heaven forbid!' It would mean misery to her—hopeless misery and distress to lookers-on. There is a saying about burning a candle at both ends and running a redhot poker through the middle. That is what she has done. She has nothing but the 'snuff' to throw into the face of her Maker."

Madam raised her hands imploringly.

"Don't say that! The Father's mercy has no bounds. If she could be brought back to life and reason long enough to utter one prayer for forgiveness—I believe it would be heard."

The doctor had another quotation ready:

"I, too, believe that—

> "'Twixt the saddle and the ground,
> If mercy's asked, then mercy's found.'

"'His compassions fail not.' And this was a child of the covenant. From all I have heard, I suppose she had religious training from godly parents——"

He was not allowed to proceed with the pious prosing. Madam's gesture was imperious.

"Do you mean to say that you know of nothing in medical science that may coax back the wandering wits for one minute? Must she die as she is, now? I have heard of drugs that stimulate the heart-action and clear the brain for a little while. You must know of such?"

The appeal was so agonized that he could not trifle with it.

"All the drugs and doctors in the land could not restore what we call 'tissues.' Hers are utterly destroyed. The almost certainty is that she is sinking steadily and surely into the stupor from which she will never rally. She has not twenty-four hours of life left to her. Let us be thankful that she is not likely to suffer pain. The candle will flicker out quietly."

As she did not speak he asked gently: "You say she aroused sufficiently at midnight to take her milk. Did she speak intelligently?"

"She did! That is, she evidently knew where she was and recognized me. She spoke a few words distinctly."

In saying it, she arose with the unmistakable purpose of ending the dialogue.

"Becca will take your orders, doctor. I have a busy morning before me. And Beth must have

some hours of sleep. I shall be within call should Becca need me."

Doctor Graham bowed in acquiescence.

"There will probably be little to do, for some hours. Becca is quite competent to manage all until I come again. I shall try to call about four o'clock this evening."

He made his way to the stable where his horse had been left, taking a circuitous route that led him to the "hennery." He was pretty sure to find Mr. Rice there at this time of day. The two held close converse for a quarter of an hour under the giant walnut-tree shading the poultry-yard. Thus it was that the physician heard what were the few coherent words uttered by the sick woman at midnight.

"And Madam Carrington never repeated them to me!" he ejaculated when his prolonged whistle of amazement had expended itself in air. "I tell you, sir, that is Christian charity of the first water! She not only takes in the abandoned wretch who hasn't a friend alive—picks her up out of the filthy mud in which she has been wallowing for years, and lodges her in her own luxurious house—*in her very own bed, sir!* and nurses her as she might her own child, but she lets her abuse her like a dog—and swear that she hates her, without answering her back as she deserves! There has been nothing finer since the story of the Prodigal Son."

"It is the Master's way of dealing with sinners with whom their former companions will have

nothing to do," observed the Little Minister. "I could not sleep last night for thinking how the shepherd brought the runaway home on his shoulder as the eastern mother carries her baby when the journey is long and hard. The sight of that noble woman kneeling by that bed while the hiss—'How I *hate* you!' must have been yet ringing in her ears—meant more to my soul than any sermon of man's preaching could."

The doctor mused silently, deeper seriousness gathering in his eyes:

"She entreated me, as for her life, to try to call back consciousness long enough to enable the lost sinner to utter one prayer for pardon. It wrung my heart to tell her that no mortal skill could do that. If the creature outlives the night I shall be surprised. But that fine woman must not sit up with her again to-night. I tell you what I will do!" struck by a sudden idea. "I'll ride over about three o'clock—(that's said to be the ebb-tide of human life, you know)—and look after matters with my own eyes. I have charged Madam Carrington to go to bed like a decent Christian and Miss Elizabeth to do the same. Becca and Mimy are capital nurses, and they can call Madam if there is any change."

Mr. Rice kept his own counsel, setting the example of obedience to the dictator's orders by betaking himself to the office early in the evening, almost confident that Madam and her coadjutor would be as reasonable.

The house was still and dark by ten o'clock. Madam had contrived, half an hour earlier, to arouse the patient from the stupor that crept with more and more deadly effect over her senses as the dark hours dragged by. There was no light in the filming eyes and she did not try to speak. But the mystic force of Madam's presence and speech lingered still. When the rich contralto, mellow with tender entreaty, bade her take the draft held to her lips, she obeyed, although with visible difficulty.

"I know it is not easy to drink it, dear," said the persuasive accents in the dulling ear. "But you will try! It will do you good! And please us all! Well done! Now you shall rest for a long time before you are disturbed again!"

At one o'clock Beth was summoned by the terrified pair of nursing maids. The character and rhythm of the sick woman's respiration had changed. Every breath was drawn with an effort, and the intervals were irregular. This was the purport of the alarm brought to the upper story.

"She don't breathe no ways natural, and you can hear her all over the room!"

Restoratives were unavailing. All the windows were opened wide and an attendant stood beside the sufferer with a great fan that brought a continual play of the cool night air to the laboring lungs.

Had the untamable spirit already taken its flight? mused the two watchers whose eyes met meaningly across the face darkening with the nameless, mys-

terious shadow of dissolution. Was it but animal life that fought with the last great enemy? There was no sign of consciousness of the presence of her attendants. When, Madam, fancying that she detected tokens of intelligence, besought her to take a spoonful of brandy held to the blackened lips, the muscles of the throat did not contract, and the liquid trickled from the corners of the mouth.

"It is useless!" pronounced Madam, sorrowfully, and the silence, which is like no other hush that falls upon mortal ears, descended upon and filled the great room.

A few more long shuddering breaths, separated by intervals of varying length, and Madam's hand pressed down the lids over the glazed eyes. By a common impulse the four women sank to their knees and Madam Carrington's voice thrilled the night air.

"Our Father in heaven! Thou art more merciful than we can ever believe or comprehend. Into Thy loving hands we commit her spirit. Have pity upon her for Christ's sake. Amen!"

A deeper-toned "Amen!" sounded at the door in which stood Mahlon Rice and Doctor Graham.

CHAPTER XXI

THE returned prodigal whom her old neighbors persisted in calling "Molly Watkins," although she claimed to have been married at least once in her checkered, lurid career, breathed her last in the early hours of Thursday morning.

The burial would be at nine o'clock the following day.

"And sure's you're born, she'll lay right along side de fam'ly, close to Mars' Paul's wife!" deplored Becca, in the kitchen cabinet. "I heerd mistis giv' dat very order to de men what's got to dig de grave! I was that took aback I jes' had to stuff my apron in my mouf and run out o' de room. Course, I darsen't say a word aginst it, but I did make so bold as to ask Miss 'Lizabeth if thar moughtn't be some mistake. An' says she, quiet and solemn-like, 'If your mistress gave the order, it is all right.' She can be dignerfied too, when she chooses, an' I ain't said another word. But I can' help wonderin' what marster would 'a said ef he had 'a knowed dat po' white-trash an' po'house scum at dat! would be buried in de same row wid him an' his kin! Times ain't what they useter was, chillen. An' Mars Paul, too! Ef he had 'a been at home would he 'a listened to de idee of diggin' dat grave right plum up aginst dat what he put up a han'some tombstone over not six weeks ago!"

In the absence of both the lords of the manor, the decree of the mistress of High Hill was carried out to the letter. The funeral services would be of the simplest sort consistent with Christian burial. Early in the day, she wrote to Mr. Carter, her near neighbor, who was also one of the overseers of the poor. It was but right that he should be notified of the decease of the late tenant of the almshouse. In the absence of her son, she would esteem it a kindness if he would be present at the interment on the morrow. And since his daughter had asked that Helen's stay with her might be prolonged, it might be well that her granddaughter should drive over with him to get the additional dresses she would need. Should Mrs. Carter feel inclined to be present at the funeral, she would be most welcome. Mr. Winston had been apprised of the decease and engaged to conduct the services. The only other persons to whom a formal invitation was sent—and this excited the ire of the aforesaid "cabinet" almost to mutinous height—were Mr. and Mrs. Horatio Gates Blankenship. Mr. Rice had ridden over early in the forenoon to say that the High Hill carriage would be sent on Friday morning to bring the pair in season for the ceremony. Furthermore—but this was not known to the indignant cabal until next day—the couple were to dine with Madam and her family before returning home. Mr. Rice offered no explanation of the invitation. Nor, it may be said here, was there need of one. The blue-blooded Virginia gentleman of the old school was

too secure of his gentlehood to think that hospitality to a white man of any rank could lower him in his own eyes, or in the estimation of others who knew his social status. The color-line had much to do with the general comprehension of what seems strange to the modern reader. The most aristocratic planter of that generation—if a white cabinet-maker, builder, or wheelwright, employed to do repairs about the place were upon the premises at meal-time—invited him as a matter of course, to sit down at the table, and partake of the food prepared for the household. It was an Occidental variation of the Oriental bread-and-salt obligation. None of the white family rebelled at the presence of mechanic or trader. Well-trained servants might gird secretly at what they rated as undue condescension on the part of their masters. They recognized the authority of rooted customs too well to offer a protest.

Friday morning dawned, clear and cool for the late summer. A funeral meant a half-holiday, and long before the appointed hour, men, women, and children in their Sunday clothes grouped about the grounds and the cluster of buildings flanking at a respectful distance, the spacious red brick mansion mantled from foundation to eaves with ivy and Virginia creepers. A solemn silence brooded over all. Not one of the waiting crowd had cared for the forlorn "stray" whom the eccentric benevolence of their mistress had brought from the poor-house to die in her own chamber. Yet some of the

younger women mourned as for their first-born; all who could contrive to sport a scrap of black ribbon wore it conspicuously and the elder women were clad in mourning. She was poor, indeed, and despised of her sisters who did not own one black gown for "fun'ral 'casion." None neglected to visit the coffin—covered with black cloth and studded with silver nails. "For all the world like she had been a lady"—Becca whispered to a crony in pausing beside it to finger the quality of the cloth. With true racial fondness for "pomp and circumstance," the servants formed into a long procession and filed through the great hall in which the coffin lay upon trestles. This duty done, they massed in and about the back porch, awaiting the signal to take up the march to the grave. The main alley of the garden had been scraped free of grass and rolled smooth; the graveyard was mowed and the walks between the mounds were cleaned. Madam's orders had been strict and were implicitly obeyed.

Mr. and Mrs. Carter were the first arrivals and they brought both girls. Helen flew into her grandmother's arms with a choking sob which could not find utterance until she was safe in Beth's reassuring embrace:

"Mother! It is all so dreadful! I didn't care for her, of course, but somehow I am as sorry as if I had! I wish she hadn't called me that horrid name the only time she ever spoke to me! I wish I had made a chance to say something kind to her! She had nobody to care for her at the last! Think

of dying with not one friend to shed a tear for you!"

"Hush, my darling! we will talk of that some other time. Now—we have had a great many flowers gathered, and put into baskets to be laid upon the grave. Grandmother would like to have you and Judith do this when the time comes. You can do *this* little service for the poor woman."

Helen caught eagerly at the proposal and flew off to prepare Judith for her share in the task. Beth looked after her with a sigh. She was thankful the light-hearted child had been spared the ghastly scenes of those last days and hours. Meeting the grandmother's eye at that moment, she read fullest sympathy in the glance that followed the girl. They two understood her mercurial temperament and intense moods as nobody else did—not even the loving father. Beth had not believed that she could ever have missed any human being, not even Paul, as she had missed and longed for his society and counsel during the past week. His absence lent depth to the gloom that wrapped the homestead like a pall. The thought of the baleful presence that had possession of the state-chamber, and held the chief place in the talk and minds of the household was an obsession with the newly-betrothed whose meditations should have been happily engaged with other and far dissimilar topics. To add to her malease, Paul's mother did not seem to regard his absence as unfortunate, or even as a drawback to her comfort. She moved and spoke like one absorbed

in a single interest to which every energy of mind and body must be devoted. Once, and once only, Beth had touched upon what was never absent from her mind:

"If Paul were at home, he would relieve you of some of the cares that I fear will wear you out," she observed, two days before the death of the pauper patient. "Nobody can take his place."

"I return thanks continually that he is hundreds of miles away," was the calm reply. "He is doing his duty where he is. Mine is here!"

Her marvellous physical and moral forces did not flag for an instant. The offers of help on the part of neighbors were declined courteously and with the composure that never forsook her in the sight of others. The least important detail of the day's duties was ordered by her, and carried out under her supervision. It was, therefore, not an afterthought, or by chance, that the short procession which left the house on the stroke of nine, and wound through the gate down the broad central walk of the garden, fell at once into order. The coffin was borne by six stalwart field-hands.

"You couldn't have picked out a more likely set of fellows in the county," Doctor Graham told his wife that evening.

Next to the coffin walked Helen and Judith, carrying their baskets of lilies and roses. Madam followed, attended by Doctor Graham; next came Beth and Mr. Rice, then the Carters, the Blankenships bringing up the rear. Mr. Winston, Bible

in hand, led the way to the open grave where waited the diggers, spades in hand. Under the trees outlining the area filled by the mortal remains of eight generations of Carringtons, was a throng of negroes, silent and respectful, also arranged in obedience to the mistress's directions. A band of singers was nearest the grave, and behind these were seats for the aged and infirm, some of whom had been carried in chairs from the quarters they had not left before since the last plantation funeral. A motley crowd filled the background. The box enclosing the inner casket was gently lowered into its resting-place, and Mr. Winston read in sonorous tones that were audible to the outermost ring of the assembly:

"Lord! make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days what it is, that I may know how frail I am," with the verses following, ending with the passionate outbreak, "Oh, spare me that I may recover strength before I go hence and be no more!"

He closed the book and bent his head. For a full minute stillness reigned over the crowd, stirred only by the whispering of the summer wind in the trees. Then the ringing tones vibrated through the sunbright air:

"Our patient, all-merciful Father in Heaven! We commit the body of our sister to the earth and leave her soul with Thee. Thy compassions fail not. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we lay her down for her long sleep. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, earth to earth!"

The rattle of three handfuls of earth falling upon the coffin punctuated the last sentence. With the first heavy thud of the clods shovelled into the grave, a mighty volume of song swelled up to the blue heavens:

"'My po' body lies moulderin' in de groun'.
A-waitin' dar for de trumpet's soun'
Dat's sho' to be heerd de worl' aroun',
My soul is marchin' on.
Glory! glory! hallelujah! My soul goes marchin' on!

My body's bound for de mortar an' de clay,
A-waitin' dar for de Jedgment Day
My sperrit's boun' for another way,
My soul goes marchin' on.
Glory! glory! hallelujah! My soul goes marchin' on.

Oh, brothers! don't you mou'n for me,
For Death's done sot my sperrit free.
An' I will oh! so happy, *happy* be!
My sperrit's marchin' on.
Glory! glory! hallelujah! My soul goes marchin' on.

You may bury me in de east, you may bury me in de west,
De Marster, He know what place is best,
For dis po' body to lie an' rest;
My soul goes marchin' on.
Glory! glory! hallelujah! My soul goes marchin' on.'"

I have written the pious doggerel in the negro dialect, because, so far as I know, it was never sung in any other.

More than a quarter of a century later, Virginia soil trembled and shook beneath the tramp of armies marching to the ring and beat of the tune brought

from darkest Africa by the enslaved descendants of dusky kings and warriors. Married to the immortal "Battle Hymn of the Republic," it will in time claim a place among classic "compositions." It had its birth in tropical forests, perhaps a thousand years agone.

As the grave-diggers did their work, the spades kept time to the music, and while they beat smooth the turf upon the mound, the final chorus was still echoing from hills beyond the river.

When the workers fell back at the word from their mistress, she lifted her hand to enjoin silence, and no one moved as the two young girls, white-robed and bare-headed, knelt to cover the mounded turf with their flowers. Thus far all had been done in exact obedience to Madam Carrington's instructions. She had not anticipated, nor had the child herself premeditated Helen's action as the two girls arose from the ground.

The supply of lilies was so bountiful that the baskets were not nearly empty when the mound was covered. With characteristic impetuosity, Helen spoke a word to her companion and turned to the mound close by the new-made grave. Then, with the rest of the lilies she formed swiftly a cross upon the grave, at the head of which stood the white stone bearing the sharply lettered inscription:

CÉCILE

WIFE OF PAUL CARRINGTON

REQUIESCAT IN PACE

"What more natural?" commented Mrs. Carter, to her husband on the way to the house. "She was the child's own mother! It is lovely to see that she is remembered."

The grandmother kissed Helen, without speaking, when the girl stole to her side with a pleading: "You didn't mind—did you? It just came to me all at once, and I couldn't help it!"

Madam held the child's hand all the way back, and sent her off with another kiss, to her room "to see about putting up her clean clothes."

The Carters could not stay to dinner. Doctor Graham and Mr. Winston had engagements that called them in other directions. Each made occasion to say a kind word to Rashe, and to pay his respects to Mrs. Blankenship. They were fellow-guests with themselves in the house. They must be recognized and treated as equals. Such were some of the minor shades of courtesy that made up "perfect breeding" in their social code.

Before separating, the little party lingered in the cool shade of the vine-curtained porch to talk over the little drama that had had its last act in the burial scene. "Molly Watkins" had been a notable figure in county society, and her career was recalled now in detail.

"The saddest story that has ever come into my life as a pastor," said Mr. Winston. "It is a mystery and a tragedy throughout. Who could have forecast such a fate for her?"

While he spoke there was borne to them the bil-

lowy melody of the barbaric folk-song from the distant "quarters." The negroes had filed across the foot of the garden after the benediction, keeping time to the measures still sounding in their ears. It was evident now that a prayer-meeting on their own account was in progress. The company on the porch stopped talking until the last strains pulsed into stillness.

"Like the groundswell of the tide!" said Mr. Rice, softly. And, Mr. Winston: "They would be horrified if they were compared to the Roman Catholics, but is not the service they are carrying on now very like a Mass for the departed soul?"

A rejoinder was projected into the conversation by Mrs. Blankenship: "Oh, Mr. Winston! I know they are full of superstitions, but they ain't *quite* heathens!"

"You are right, my dear Madam, yet I confess I have sometimes been tempted to wish that our prayers could follow sinning souls into the next world. It is fearful to think that any soul God has made is ever beyond the reach of our love and prayer. But I have no time to discuss doctrine and possible heresies." He rose with a genial smile. "Madam Carrington! I trust the excitement and fatigue of the past few days have not been too much for you. Doctor! you must prescribe a tonic and rest."

He shook hands all around, and the Carters followed him.

"They underestimate my strength," remarked Madam, settling herself in her rocking-chair, and

reaching, as from the force of habit, for the knitting-bag hung upon the back. "Mr. Blankenship! I am going to pass you over presently into Mr. Rice's hands while Mrs. Blankenship and I discuss some domestic matters that would not interest either of you. I have been thinking a good deal lately of two young girls who are in your charge, and who ought not to remain the burden they must be to both of you. I mean the Jones sisters. I should be glad to use a little influence I have in the Fredericksburg Orphan Asylum to get them into that institution. I suppose the question must go before the overseers of the poor before final arrangements can be made. But I did not like to speak of it to any one else before consulting you."

"Thank you, Ma'am!" responded the flattered Rashe. "As you say, them gals is old enough to know somethin' more than that mother of thurn ken learn them."

By the time he had expatiated at length upon the values of education and "nice behavior" for women, and the total unfitness of "that ar' Chaney Jones" to impart so much as the rudiments of these to her offspring, Madam thought it expedient to consult her watch:

"Is it possible that it is eleven o'clock? Elizabeth, my dear, tell Tom to bring a glass of shrub for these gentlemen before they set out for a walk through the poultry-yard and the garden and orchard. Mr. Blankenship is so much interested in such things that we must allow them plenty of

time. Then, you have letters to write, I know—" with a gleam of the eye which Beth understood—"and Mrs. Blankenship and I will have our chat."

CHAPTER XXII

MADAM CARRINGTON'S programme was carried out to the letter. After Beth had passed the iced draft with her own hands to the two men and seen them stroll across the yard, pipe in mouth, toward the hennery and gardens, she smilingly excused herself and left the hostess and her guest to their "chat."

Mrs. Blankenship, mightily refreshed by the "shrub" and slice of sponge cake, the more grateful since, as she informed the company, she had "eat next to no breakfast, being that excited at thought of what was to be done that day—" had never been more entirely at her ease in spirit and in flesh, than when she lay back in the cushioned rocker, her feet upon the stool Beth had adroitly insinuated under them, and the great lady of the county—"a-sittin' 'longside o' me, with her knittin' as sociable an' easy as an ole shoe." This to her sister when catechised by her as to the eventful day. "Tain't the real genu*wine* quality what takes on airs."

Madam's talk began with comments upon the few belongings of the dead woman, and the disposition to be made of them.

"It was kind and thoughtful in you to pack her trunk and send it with her," she said. "I suppose she brought little, if anything else, back to Virginia with her? I am surprised that she kept any clothes

worth having, if all she told of her poverty were true. There were some articles of underwear of fair quality and not much worn, besides handkerchiefs and stockings. I shall have everything washed and mended and sent back to you with your permission. You may have no use for them yourself, but you may find some poor person who would like to have them."

"That's more than likely," interposed Betsey. "Some of the poppers would jump out of their skin with joy to have a collar or a handkerchief or a pa'r o' stockings. You see I sent her underclo'es, thinkin' some on' em mought do to lay her out in——"

The flow of words was arrested by a negative gesture of Madam's shapely hand.

"That was considerate—and what might be expected of you. But there was little time for mending and washing them, or for looking over the contents of the trunk. My niece Elizabeth and I could spare whatever was needed, and we were more than willing to supply the burial garments."

Mrs. Betsey had an ear for what she characterized as "genteel talk," and "burial garments" accorded well with what Becca had made a chance to confide to her: to wit, that "*She* was shrouded in one of the mistis's best nightgowns—linen, and trimmed with sure 'nough lace." There was no saying into what extravagances the whims of the "quality" might lead them.

Mrs. Blankenship got in her reserved bit of information just here:

"Thar was one thing I meant to 'a-spoke about before. She hadn't no books fur to speak of. Jest a few old trashy novels an' the like she used to read herself to sleep over, o' rainy days an' of a Sunday when thar was nobody to amuse her. Thar was one real funny ole book—pretty nigh as big as a Bible, that she kep' in the trunk most times. Oncet in a while I'd come upon her suddent-like, and ketch her a-readin' of it. Sometimes she'd be a-writin' on one of the leaves. I ast her one time ef t'was a receipt-book she was makin'. With that she laughed right out, and, sez she, 'You've hit it this time!' It's a receipt for makin' devil's broth that I'm gettin' up. Thar'll be the devil to pay when it's done.' With that she shows me the outside of the book, an' thar was a big brass cross on the side. An' sez she, 'That's a charm to keep fools from meddlin' with the broth before I've finished it!' I declar the way she said it made my blood run cold. Some days she was as crazy as a March hare! So, when I come upon the book in the bottom of the trunk, I felt 's if I wouldn't tech it with a pa'r o' tongs. That ugly cross looked so wicked! I allers did hate the Catholics, an' it popped into my head, when she said that about the charm, she mought be one. Ef she was, out o' my house she'd go, no matter what Rashe mought have to say. He was fa'rly bewitched about her sometimes. I put the question right at her: 'Maybe you're a Catholic?' I sez, out bold. She give another squeal:

"'Me! devil a bit of it! I picked that up in a

shop in Rome. They tole me of the charm, you see.' So, as I was a' sayin', when I come upon the nasty book in the trunk I'd a great mind to take it to the kitchen an' burn it up. Then, thinks I, 'After all, it ain't my property, and it mought be onlucky to fool with it—if what she sez is half-way true.' I wropped it up in a newspaper, and laid it back in the far corner of the bottom of the trunk an' packed all the other things on top of it. You'll find it thar, onless some of the niggers may a' been foolin' with the things."

"I found it when I unpacked the trunk the day she came." Madam had been re-winding a ball of knitting cotton that did not seem to suit her. Her hands and voice were steady as she took up the stocking she was at work upon. "It is what is called a Roman Breviary—very old and perhaps valuable upon that account. It is written in Latin, and, no doubt, belonged to some Roman Catholic priest. Travellers in foreign lands pick up such things and bring them home as curiosities. Some time I must think to show the book to Mr. Rice. He knows more of such things than I do."

Mrs. Rashe giggled: "He's a preacher, and ain't afeered to handle what may be 'charmed' for what we know. As I said, I wouldn't 'a' teched it with a pa'r o' tongs. Without they was red-hot."

Madam smiled good-humored toleration of the superstition:

"I wish I could make you comprehend, Mrs. Blankenship, how we all appreciate your great kind-

ness to the unfortunate woman whom we buried to-day. She was a stranger and you took her in, sick and friendless, and you ministered unto her. Our Lord promised an especial blessing to those who do these things."

Betsey's handkerchief went up to her eyes and she sniffed loudly. Madam's knitting-needles clicked evenly until her visitor's emotion subsided. Betsey belonged to a class which may still be found in certain provincial regions, who consider it comely and reverent to pay the tribute of watery emotion to "Bible talk," whenever introduced into conversation. It was not a violent transition when Madam Carrington led the talk to the every-day works and ways of the motley crew over whom Betsey and her spouse presided.

By the time the inspectors of gardens, orchard, and poultry-yard returned, hot and tired, dinner was ready. The guests did not suspect that it was served an hour earlier than was the High Hill custom because the hostess knew one o'clock to be the time at which the two were used to take the heaviest meal of the day. It was hospitable to make the concession to plebeian habits, and tactful not to let them know why the change was made.

Madam had her confidential comment upon the alteration in the daily routine when, at three o'clock, the carriage received the gratified Blankenships and rolled down the avenue.

"They have dinner at one, or maybe half past twelve at home," she remarked, a half-tone of weari-

ness in her voice. "It was convenient, moreover, to me to-day for I must rest for a little while before I have a somewhat important business-talk with you, Mr. Rice.

"May I trouble you to step into my room for a minute?"

The spacious chamber had been literally swept and garnished in the last twenty-hour hours. It had never worn a fairer aspect to Mr. Rice's eyes than when he stood in the middle of the floor and looked about him at the changed aspect of the whilome hospital ward.

Sheer, crisp curtains were looped back from the windows; the hangings of the white bed were again in place; the folding-screen had disappeared; the table and reading-lamp it had concealed were at the other end of the room. Fresh covers were upon the cushions of chair and window-seats. Not a vestige of the scenes which had kept nerves and sympathies on the rack remained. The air swept freely through the chamber, faintly and deliciously scented by the roses abloom about the porch.

"All that has passed in the last fortnight might be a bad dream!" said the Little Minister, half aloud as Madam Carrington bade him "Sit down! I have something that must be said to you without further delay."

In saying it, she took a chair facing him and he was instantly impressed by the seriousness of her manner and tone.

She was never florid. Neither had her complexion

the hue of fine old ivory which sometimes marks the approach of age in complexions that were once fair and delicate. But her pallor now was startling. There were shadows under the dark eyes that were not there an hour ago. Her voice had a hard *timbre* he had never heard in it before.

In her hand was a parcel done up in white paper—apparently a book or a box. Her fingers were taut upon it as she went on:

"This book was in the trunk brought from the poorhouse. Thanks to Mrs. Blankenship's superstitious fears, she did not open it. It has a cross on one side which she took to be a proof that the owner was a Roman Catholic.

"As you will see, the cross has nothing to do with the contents. I am morally certain that nobody has read what is written here except myself. No other eyes beside yours and mine must ever read a word of it. You will understand why I say this, and agree with me when you have mastered the manuscript. You will be surprised and horrified at what you will see here. One thing you should know before I pass the book over to you. One reason why I select you as my only confidant of the incredible story is, you have a right to know that the woman who died in that bed, and was buried in the Carrington graveyard to-day was *not* what she professed to be. She was not Mary Watkins—although you will learn something here of *her* life and death. I tell you this, because I do not wish to spring the strange truth upon you without notice.

"Will you take that to the office and read it from beginning to end? It is now half past three. If you will let me come to you at half past four, we will discuss the matter calmly. As I have said, there is no other person living to whom I would entrust it for an instant."

He arose when she set back her chair as a token that the conference was at an end, and received the parcel from her hand. Literally stricken dumb by the astounding preamble—mysterious as astounding—he could only express his acquiescence in her will and obedience to her behest.

Bowing again, deeply and silently, as they parted, he took his way to the office, meeting and seeing no one in the shaded path. His door stood wide open. It was seldom shut in fine weather, this corner of the yard being secluded from other parts of the grounds. He closed it instinctively in entering, and as mechanically turned the key in the lock. But one thought took shape in his mind in the confusion wrought by the amazing communication to which he had hearkened: He must not share the secret which he was to learn with anybody. No one must know that it had been committed to him. The sunshine, streaming through the western windows, flooded him as he seated himself just where Paul Carrington had sat on that rainy afternoon, less than a month ago, and poured into his friend's ears the story of the grievous burden that had cramped his young manhood. The memory came back vaguely to Mahlon Rice as he undid the twine

binding the parcel and stripped off the paper. His subconscious self put a question as he did this:

Why should this dark and direful mystery be revealed to *him* instead of to the son Madam idolized and trusted beyond all other counsellors? Why was her chaplain explicitly informed that he was not to share the revelation with another living creature?

The problem was still uppermost in his perturbed brain when the book was uncovered.

It was, he saw at a glance, an ancient Roman Breviary, worn and dingy except where the brass cross in bold relievo had been burnished as by repeated rubbings. The owner had apparently attached peculiar sacredness to the emblem. About fifty printed leaves at the front and back of the volume had been neatly pared away to within an inch of the margins. The rest had been removed entirely and the space left was filled with letter-paper, trimmed to the size of the missing leaves. It was an ingenious device, the outer pages forming a firm frame for the interpolated matter. This was covered with written characters, all done by the same hand, although the manuscript in some parts was irregular as if penned under excitement or by feeble fingers.

His bewilderment unabated, the one man to whom Madam Carrington was willing to reveal the discovery forced upon her by fate, began at the top of the outermost page.

CHAPTER XXIII

And this is what he read in the dancing lights cast athwart the pages by the August sun, laughing through the leaves of the acacia-tree outside of the window. This, what had been read in the dead of night by the light of her shaded lamp, behind the folding-screen, during Madam Carrington's first vigil in the sick-room.

"*To Madam Paulina Carrington*, alias *Mrs. Edmund Travers Carrington* (*otherwise 'Et Cetera'*), *Lady of the Manor of High Hill and High Priestess of the Church and Parish of Mount Hor, Opecancanough County, State of Virginia, United States of North America.*

"I am writing this on shipboard, bound for America. This is the first stage of the third earthly existence upon which I have entered. I have had Christian burial for the second time, but in a foreign land under the patronage of the American consul who has forwarded to your impeccable son the legal certificate of my demise.

"I am once more free to carry out my own plans without interference from any mortal man—or woman!

"Your son and henchman has perhaps told you what my brother, acting as my agent, confided to him as the preliminary to the system of blackmail that we carried on successfully for five years. You

have then known long ago that the coffin laid away under the auspices of your Presbyterian Shepherd of souls, did not contain human remains. You have helped the immaculate Paul keep a secret that would have left a big smear across the Carrington escutcheon and made your majesty the laughing-stock of the whole State.

"It was an audacious stroke, but it worked well. Armande, my clever brother, was my kindred spirit. We laughed together many times over his masterpiece. He had the money—all of it. As Mrs. Jules Dupont, the wife of one of the richest planters in the West Indies, who was frantically in love with me, I needed no pecuniary aid. My second matrimonial venture was more brilliant than the first. I need not remind you what a despicable failure *that* was. For three years I was like an eagle chained in a mud-puddle. And how I *hated* the man who had tricked me into it by stories of his baronial halls and ample income! It enrages and sickens me to think of it!

"Well! for ten years we had our swing—Jules and I—on both sides of the ocean. You wouldn't be interested in the details, and I can't trust myself to think of the happiest period of my life.

"Then, my husband died, and by some unaccountable oversight on his part, he had failed to make a will, or if it were made, it was never found. His scoundrelly sisters, who had been madly jealous of me, came forward with the demand that my marriage to their brother be proved, and with assertions

that I was neither widow nor *divorcée*, when I claimed to have married him. There was a terrible fight—and it ended in a compromise. I had to take my lawyer into full confidence, and he advised me to suppress the facts in the case, and let him get me out of the scrape as best he could. To avoid the publicity and expense of a lawsuit, the crafty women offered to pay me a given sum if I would not interfere with the course of the law, which made them legatees of the entire estate. Thanks to the manner of life that suited us both, this same estate was less than one-half of the plunder they expected to secure. But they had to be content with what they got. As for me, I faced the fact that I must now spend hundreds where I had been used to spending thousands. I took the pitiful sum remaining after that rascally lawyer had his fee, and began life anew.

"I will not bore you with the incidents of the next three years. The recital would disgust you, even more than my dancing and theatre-going and other vagaries used to vex your righteous soul.

"It may interest you somewhat to hear that during a visit to Tallahassee, Florida, I encountered, by the oddest chance imaginable, my old neighbor and admirer, 'Molly' Watkins. She told me her story—a wretched affair from first to last.

"Of course you do not credit me—you never did—with having so much as a rag of conscience, or what you would call, 'natural affection.' So you will probably attribute to other causes the circumstance that I had certain queer qualms when

the poor creature reminded me that we were 'intimate friends' when I lived in Virginia, and how she 'fairly worshipped me and was never so flattered by anything she ever heard as when she was called like Mrs. Paul Carrington.' There *was* a resemblance—as you may recall—in height, complexion, and in some features. She confessed that she had tried to copy my manner and speech, and had been told over and over that she had succeeded. In fact, she had been my parasite and was really fond of me in her way.

"The upshot of the matter was that we joined our forces—such as they were—and set out to seek our fortunes in company. These took us by hook and by crook to the other side of the world. We managed to see foreign countries together, and had some marvellous experiences in those three years. Our longest stay was in a miserable lodging-house in Genoa. My companion fell ill that winter and was not well enough to 'move on,' if we had cared to travel.

"The night she died the brightest idea of my life came to me.

"I had died once, and improved my fortunes immensely by the act. Why not die again, and be buried decently and officially? My invaluable memory had brought to me the recollection that the present American consul in Genoa was an old acquaintance of your son. Indeed, we had met him at the White Sulphur Springs the summer I was there for my health. He had had the merest

glimpse of me, but he would recollect his former classmate and be kind to any compatriot.

"So, I wrote to him over the signature of 'Mary Watkins,' of the death of my travelling-companion, Mrs. Jules Dupont, a native of Opecancanough County, Virginia, although she had not lived there for many years. She was a near connection of Paul Carrington of High Hill in the same county.

"The scheme worked to a charm! He called upon Miss Mary Watkins, engaged to see to all the matters connected with the obsequies of the late Mrs. Jules Dupont, and was 'almost sure he had seen me somewhere years ago. He had a most pleasant recollection of Paul Carrington and the highest respect for the family.'

"I accounted for the fancied resemblance by suggesting that he 'may have met Mrs. Dupont upon a visit to Opecancanough County, and that we were said to look alike although there was no relationship.'

"I also said that I had heard her speak often and affectionately of the Carringtons, and I was sure they would be grateful for news of her. I was not personally acquainted with them, having resided so long abroad, first as a governess in Paris, latterly, as friend and companion to my deceased country woman. My name need not be mentioned in the correspondence. He swallowed the bait, hook and all, as you know from the official and friendly letters your son received from the consulate.

"I chanced once to overhear you say to your blessèd son, 'Your wife is the cleverest, most brilliant woman I have ever known.'

"I giggled then. I am laughing outright now in reckoning up the stock with which I am beginning the world for the fourth time—counting my birth as a baby, as one. What you Virginians would call the 'smartest thing' I ever did came about by the accident of seeing the tattooed arm of an Italian peddler who had been a sailor. He called to offer his wares to me a week after Molly's death. Like a flash, the sight of the marks brought to me the recollection of the initials upon Molly's shoulder, the story of which I had heard often. I asked the man where I could be tattooed, making a joke of the wish. He answered that he could do it; that he had been employed by other foreigners to tattoo them. 'American *Forestieri* had strange fancies, and plenty of money.'

"I engaged him out of hand to tattoo two letters upon my shoulder, and paid him four *lires* for the job.

"I imagined that the letters might be of use in the drama I had already forecast. For I am bound for my native shores as the vagrant Molly Watkins, and I shall prosecute my claims upon you, madam, and my *ci-devant* husband, under this disguise.

"I shall make my way into the county, and lie in wait somewhere in the humblest house I can find, where I will not be recognized, until, as orphaned and unfriended Molly Watkins, I learn all that I

would know of the present status of the 'royal line of Carringtons' (that is what I heard it called in dead earnest by one of your tribe).

"If the man who is still my husband had taken to himself another wife, I should be exceeding glad of the chance to bleed him of his last dollar, or, if he refused to buy me off, to make him and his royal line a stench in the nostrils of the community which is his world.

"That was my well-concerted plan before I took passage for America. It is still my rooted purpose now that we are six days out. I have never learned how to save money, and the scanty sum I have contrived to reserve for this expedition represents my last cent in the game of living.

"Should I not live to reach my destination you may perhaps get this. When I am once on Virginia soil, I will take measures to ensure its delivery to you.

"For I *hate* you with a hatred I have never felt for another human being! You foiled my ambition at every point. The man who was my slave before he took me to the home over which I had supposed I was to reign a queen—took your sovereignty as a thing to be expected. He was stunned when he found that I was dissatisfied with a secondary place in the household, and not disposed to submit to your despotic rule.

"Your show of resignation to the plight into which he had plunged you, did not blind me for a second. When I dashed wildly into social dissipations, un-

heard of by the ninety-and-nine righteous who were the *élite* of your petty court, you refrained from open opposition. Do you imagine that I did not see through your scheme to strengthen your hold upon your subservient son by apparent indulgence of my excesses? I read it all as clearly as if you had fought me in the open field, instead of manœuvring to circumvent me. We made no pretense of friendliness—you and I, as you know, while keeping up a show of civility in society at large.

"I hope you comprehended why and how heartily I hated you, your works and ways—and finally the son who had tricked me into bondage.

"Upon him, at least, I can wreak my vengeance, should the fates grant that I find him alive and enjoying the smug respectability paid for by the blackmail cunningly extracted by my brother and fellow-conspirator. He shall pay with his heart's blood for every humiliation he has made me suffer. The debt rolled up against him in all these last years of comparative indigence and Bohemianism, is not to be cancelled by money."

(Several blank pages intervened before the manuscript was resumed.)

. . . . . .

"*Poorhouse Pension: H. G. Blankenship, proprietor*, July third, 184–

"The plot thickens! I am installed in these aristocratic precincts, in high favor with my host, and tolerated by his wife.

"My identity, as the adventurous vagabond Molly Watkins, is established beyond the shadow of a doubt. I had a rheumatic twinge in my shoulder the night of my arrival and begged 'Betsey' to rub it with some liniment she recommended as a 'sure and certain cure for rheumatiz.' She espied the tattooing, and got the tale of how my sailor-brother had persuaded me to let him do it when I was a girl. One or two of the elect ninety-and-nine have driven to the door to inquire into the rumor that the reprobate of the flock has taken refuge in the poorhouse. But no offer of rescue and conversion was made until to-day, when your magnificent son and heir caused a terrible commotion among the herded swine here by bringing in person a message from your sublime *self!*

"I fled up to my wretched room at the first alarm, and watched him from my window, screened by the cotton curtain. Time has dealt more mercifully with him than might have been expected in a disconsolate widower. As I took in every detail of his appearance and manner as he sat at his ease under the trees, conversing in his most polished style with the superintendent of the almshouse who had taken me in and lodged and fed me as a beggar—do you wonder that I cursed him and you in my hot heart? My hostess who admires him immensely tells me he is likely to marry your ward Elizabeth Moore. (*The pen cut through the paper there and no wonder!*) I always detested her, partly because she was a favorite with you, and I suspected that you were

disappointed not to add her fortune to the Carrington wealth—and partly because her praises were rung in my ears wherever I went, lastly, because she was invariably courteous and forbearing to me, try to provoke her 'though I might. And after all these years of waiting, you are really going to marry her to your immaculate Paul!

"Never mind! I am biding my time. Heaven (or the devil) grant me patience to wait until the right hour—the hour of vengeance—strikes!

"The boon-companions sat too far from me for me to catch more than stray fragments of their talk, but the well-modulated voice of one brought to me what I have tried to forget all these years. The same voice promised me the fulfilment of my highest hopes when we were both young!

"And *now!*

. . . . . .

"*Sunday, July* 8, 184—

"I 'attended divine service' to-day for the first time in the Lord knows how many years—if He cares to keep the account.

"I put on my Sunday clothes and accompanied Mrs. Blankenship in an open carryall drawn by a pair of mules. You may have seen the equipage? I left her at her sister's house, a mile or so from the sanctuary, and went on with the driver. I had him put me out a hundred yards or so from the church. Then I strolled with lady-like languor toward the sacred edifice (you see I have not forgotten the vocabulary of the ninety-and-nine). I

had a queer catch in the throat when I recognized Aleck, who drove the High Hill carriage fifteen years ago. He was standing near a handsome chariot with an embossed 'C.' on the door, and the detached horses tied to the nearest tree were fine enough to match carriage and driver. His wool has been peppered-and-salted by time, and he has grown stouter but I should have known him anywhere, and the sight shook me as nothing else in the region has done. I hurried by and got me safely into the church.

"The preacher was the only unfamiliar feature in the scene. I had heard that little Rice had been laid on the shelf, but makes edifying exhibition of his Christian spirit by continuing to go to church regularly. I soon detected him in the small, spruce worshipper sitting half-way up the aisle. You, I had seen as I entered—sitting, as you have for fifty years, in what the Methodists call 'the Amen benches' at the right of the pulpit. Alongside of you was your ward and prospective daughter-in-law.

(*I had to stop to laugh there!*)

"The incomparable scion of your noble house was modestly ensconced in a corner under a window three-quarters of the way to the door. He did not stare over the congregation, as is the manner of many of your fellow saints of the masculine gender, so I cannot flatter myself that he saw the woman in black, sheltered behind a thick blue veil sitting not far from the door.

"To borrow a Bible phrase—'the day of my ven-

geance is at hand!' I have planned it to the minutest feature. I shall wait until the wedding-day is fixed. . . .

"I could have choked her to-day when I saw her, serene and refined—prettier than she was at twenty—the gentlewoman through-and-through—fitted by nature and by education to play the Lady Bountiful far more graciously than you have ever done—and be adored to her latest day by the man of her heart. For one insane instant I was tempted to rise in the middle of the sermon, and pour out the story that would bring the fair fabric about her ears. It is better that my original design should be developed.

"There will be one uninvited guest at that wedding-feast!

"Nothing else has brought those abhorrent years of servitude and rebellion back to me with such force as that conventicle in the grove and the so-called 'services' held there to-day. I shut my eyes as the preacher alternately thundered and whined his message to the prim and proper and pious assembly of saints, and the few sinners that might have straggled in—and fancied I was back at High Hill. I recalled the headaches and belated toilettes I invented to excuse me from attendance at morning prayers in the big dining-room, with a background of negroes near the door—divided even at the throne of grace and the family altar—(you see I have all the phrases pat at my tongue's end!) from the pale-faced elect. The same sickening farce was played

every night. At the latter there was singing, and through the open drawing-room door 'Miss' Lizabeth's piano led her choir in a hymn.

"My—for the nonce—sanctimonious spouse played the patriarch in reading the Bible and 'leading in prayer'!

"Ugh! I used to pinch myself to make sure this was really Cécile Larue, who was condemned to bear a part in the ghastly performance.

"I suppose the son of thunder who held forth to-day will expect a thumping big fee for 'uniting in the holy bonds of matrimony' the richest planter in the county with the polysyllabic Indian name, to the heiress whose fortune he has nursed into goodly proportions for lo! these many years. The pastor's disappointment will be another feature in my drama.

"I have rehearsed it, a hundred times in imagination. This record—done up in a breviary His Holiness the Pope has blessed—will be my wedding-gift to yourself. You can communicate the contents to the unhappy pair at your leisure. You will need a little time in which to collect your wits and breath. You celebrated my first homecoming by a fainting fit which is historical in the family annals. I must have heard of it, from black and from white gossips, a hundred times. The negroes used to say that 'mistis fainted *dead* away.'

"I devoutly hope and pray that the adjective may be no mere figure of speech in the swoon which should make my second bridal reception immortal in the history of the Royal Carringtons."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE latter pages of the manuscript were written in haste, or under a nervous strain that changed the handwriting almost out of resemblance to the clerkly characters of the portions penned in the leisurely hours and days of the ocean voyage. Some passages were so nearly illegible that the reader was obliged to study out a few words and to guess at the meaning of others. The physical condition of the half-crazed woman accounted for much of this irregularity, but the reflection wrought no relenting in the gentle-hearted reader.

The last line read, he collected the loose leaves, and, because his habits were scrupulously methodical, rearranged them in the order of the numbers scrawled at the upper right-hand corner of each page; laid them smoothly in place and packed them back in the hollowed breviary. He snapped the clasps tightly and pushed the book as far away as his arms could reach. Then he leaned his elbows upon the table, bound his throbbing temples with tense fingers, and shut his eyes.

He could have fancied that he stood upon the verge of a seething pit from which vapors, assuming the shapes of mocking devils, arose to confront him. Never, in all the course of his calm, sheltered life, had imagination conjured up such a series of weird

horrors and incredible adventure as he had read as actual and present human history. He got up, by and by, staggering like a drunken man, and went into the back room where stood a bowl and pitcher of water. Madam Carrington would be here presently. He must get the blood out of his brain before she came.

He mumbled it to himself in plunging his head into the bowl. Dazed though he was, she was uppermost in his thought. As he dried his hair and rubbed the back of his neck with a coarse towel to equalize the circulation, he spoke aloud again, solemnly and clearly:

"Lord! teach me to speak some word of comfort to her!"

He repeated the prayer in his heart when he saw her turn the corner of the house into the gravel-path. He watched her, as for the first time. In height she was above the medium stature of women, and her erect carriage and the stately poise of chin and head made her seem even taller. Her son asserted teasingly that she had "learned her gait in the days of the minuet, like many another Presbyterian belle, who had never danced in her life." Her step was as even and firm as that of a healthy woman of half her age. Somehow, the sight of her steadied the watcher's pulses. He met her in the door, lending an unnecessary hand to help her up the single step, with a mien so natural that she did not give him a second glance.

Her eyes passed directly to the breviary, the more

conspicuous for lying in the sunshine that threw into bold relief the glittering cross upon the side.

As directly she began what she had come to say.

"You have read it—all?" pointing to the book in taking the chair set for her.

The Little Minister bowed: "Every line, Madam! I could wish it had never been written—or rather that every word were a lie!"

"Be seated—please! We will talk the matter out like sensible Christians. I am thankful, on my part, that we have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, although seen through a medium colored by such hate and spite as I had never dreamed possible in any human being—least of all, in a wife and mother. I shall regret all the rest of my life, that she did not recover consciousness for a few hours, that I might have asked forgiveness for neglect of my duty toward her. Don't interrupt me—please! I was never actively unkind to her, even when my disapproval of her conduct was strongest. But I merely tolerated her! I never tried, in the fear of God and in the spirit of true religion, to seek what was best in her—and to make her feel that I—her husband's mother—would be a mother to her, if she would let me. Do you know that her own mother left her husband and three children and ran away with another man when Cécile was ten years old? Paul told me this long after he was deserted by Mrs. Larue's daughter. The children were brought up by an aunt who was nominally Larue's sister-in-law and housekeeper—in reality, she was his mistress. All this Paul

gathered, little by little, when it was too late for the knowledge to save him from wrecking his own life. The whole stock was corrupt—root and branch. Cécile's beauty and accomplishments were regarded by her family as her capital of which she must make good use. You know the rest!

"She was young when she was married. Had I pursued a different course of conduct—if I had compelled myself to love and understand her; if I had made concessions to her prejudices and studied methods of conciliating her when she gave way to her temper, and showed how she detested her new mode of life—if, in short, I had left nothing undone to win her, instead of forcing upon her lessons foreign to her instincts and what she called principles—you and I might not be now discussing the most shameful career that ever disgraced the annals of an honorable family."

"My dear lady!" for her voice broke upon the last words and she turned partly away, that he might not see her face. "Your forbearance, your tact—your long-suffering kindness were beyond praise. And when you brought the unrepentant sinner home to your house—even after you learned that she had imposed herself upon you as another person—and you knew her for what she was—one who had wrought sorrow after sorrow for you and yours—you nursed her as if she had been your own child. I saw and heard you——"

The forced composure gave way at the recollection. He walked to the window to regain composure.

The full mellow tones of the one he sought to defend against herself broke the troubled silence:

"From my heart I thank you for trying to exculpate me from the accusations of my own conscience, dear friend. But I have thought of little else in my waking hours for a week, and more. God grant that the terrible lesson be not thrown away! Now for a matter or two which must be definitely settled between us before we bury this shameful thing out of sight and mind. As I said to you to-day, no other excepting ourselves, must ever—so long as our lives last, nor ever afterward—know this story. It is as unbelievable as it is monstrous and revolting. If known it would take rank with county legends for a century to come. I will not have my son's name blackened by the tale you have read to-day. He has suffered enough to atone for his early folly and temporary madness. So far as I can accomplish it, by the help of God, his future shall be as tranquil and rich as the love of a good and pure woman can make it.

"To confide the foul tale to *her* would be needless barbarity. I will not have her heart broken and her imagination fouled by the recital.

"And there is Helen! when I go over the various stages of the tragedy in which I have borne a part, I find it harder to forgive that poor wretch when I recall her lack of motherliness than for any other enormity of which she was guilty. She never cared for her baby; neither in her letter nor in anything reported to us of her sayings, is there an allusion to her child. And you recollect the epithet she threw

at her the only time she spoke to her! Not for worlds would I let the dear girl suspect the relationship. It may have been a touch of sentimentality that moved me to have Helen lay flowers upon the grave of her real mother, when I thought of the pitiful farce of her care and tenderness for the mock grave beside it. The tombstone tells no lie now!"

She checked herself abruptly at that. It was plain that the one bitter drop of which she could not purge her heart was the insult to her beloved grandchild.

A brief pause was ended by her putting out her hand for the breviary. "If she had had any real respect—not to say reverence—for what she said was her church—I could not excuse the desecration of a book that should have been sacred in her eyes. I learned, before I had known her a month, that the church to which she feigned allegiance was no more to her than any other. Her visits to town, under the pretext of attending the confessional, were a pretext for theatre-going, shopping, and the like. She owned this to Paul and regarded it as a joke.

"But enough of this! I bring myself up penitently, many times a day, by asking how the poor girl could have been anything but what she was with that fatal, corrupt strain of ancestry.

"One thing remains to be done to seal our compact. I trust you without a shade of doubt." She undid the clasps and turned the contents of the hollowed book upon the table.

"Put them into the fireplace, and strike a match."

He obeyed dumbly. The loose sheets caught the blaze and burned like tinder.

The sun's rays were level by now, and a rising breeze rustled the feathery sprays of the acacias. The shadows were cast across the room to the hearth as the flames flickered into black ashes.

Mr. Rice swept them under the logs piled on the hearth, and replaced the broom in its corner. Next, he wrapped the clamped breviary in the paper in which Madam Carrington had enveloped it.

"I will bury *it*, by and by," he said, briefly.

The involuntary emphasis upon the pronoun made inquiry superfluous. Nor was a word exchanged between them when they parted at the intersection of the white gravelled path with the wider walk leading to the garden gate.

Half an hour later he rejoined Madam on the side-porch. Their chairs were set there in the old familiar order. Madam occupied hers and motioned to the rocker set at an inviting conversational angle.

"It is a goodly and pleasant thing to take up the old life again," he said, gratefully. "One can hardly believe that we have left it off even for a little while. And we are to have what our Helen calls a 'real High Hill sunset.' She will have it that there are none such anywhere else in the world. We miss the sprite. She will be back soon?"

"In two days more. There is no propriety in her staying away longer."

Again mutual comprehension of a hidden meaning rendered comment needless.

Both studied silently the sunset that justified Helen's encomium. The dark lines of tree-tops that jagged the western hills were defined sharply against a horizon of purest saffron, merging, by a miraculous sympathy of color, into rose-pink, and, far above this, into clear azure shading into tenderness in pulsing up to the zenith.

The exquisite harmonies of the "homing hour" in the country—the distant chiming of bells and gentle lowing of herds on the way from pasture to byre; the chirping of feeding birds and the crooning of their mothers, as they were nested for the night; the vespers of katy-did and cicada—attuned as no mortal master could harmonize them—all accorded perfectly with a sunset strangely beautiful even for High Hill.

A light step upon the porch-floor stole into, rather than broke upon, the dreamful silence entrancing the two rapt observers of the unspeakable glory. Both turned, smilingly, as Beth appeared, her hands full of papers.

"I walked down the avenue a little way to meet Dick with the mail," she said, beginning the distribution. "Three letters for you, aunt. All of which look like bills—receipted of course—and the *Watchman and Observer*, and the *Compiler*. For you, Mr. Rice, *The Whig* and *The Farmer's Register*, and never a letter! Don't look at the papers until the sun is entirely down. Was there ever anything more lovely?"

Madam's glance passed from the speaker's face

to the letter in her hand. Putting her arm about the slender figure, she drew Beth down upon her lap. One of the beautiful old hands stroked the blushing face:

"You have had good news, then?" as if an affirmative were a foregone conclusion.

"The best we could have! By a fortunate chance, he met in New York the man he expected to see in Cincinnati. So the Ohio trip may be postponed." The soft voice took on a joyous ring. "He is coming home sooner than he had planned. We may expect him to-morrow."

The cadence of the last sentences blended harmoniously, to the listeners' ears, with the "homing" symphony that had enchained their senses.

None of the trio had any words ready. In the tulip-poplar nearest the garden gate the night-singing mocking-bird began his vespers. A mist swam between the eyes of the Little Minister and the purpling hills tipped with gold.

It was Madam Carrington who broke the long silence. Her voice was full and rich, and every syllable was rounded reverently. Her look was that of one who listens to, and renders from dictation, a message not her own:

"At evening-time there shall be PEACE!"

THE END

UCLA-Young Research Library
PS3007 .C235
yr
L 009 534 972 6

PS
3007
C235

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
AA 001 221 170 2